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What Maisie Knew: Nineteenth-Century Selfhood in the Mind of the Child

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Just one month before the first issue of Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) appeared in the *New Review*, American psychologists G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis co-authored an innovative work on a seemingly esoteric subject: "A Study of Dolls" (1896) presents scrupulously detailed statistical data on childhood doll-play, based on responses to a questionnaire distributed to over eight hundred parents and teachers.¹ Fellow psychologist James Sully shared Hall and Ellis's interest in dolls: in 1898, he contributed an essay called "Dollatry" to the *Contemporary Review* and thereby publicized, to a wider audience than Hall and Ellis had reached, the unconventional methodology sometimes deployed in the name of psychological research.

Sully's objective in publishing his research was to justify this methodology and thus to confer credibility on the newly emerging discipline of Child Study, which he and Hall were pioneering in Britain and in America respectively.² When Sully argues that "if dolls could tell us what they are supposed, as confidants and confessors, to hear from the lips of their small devotees, they might throw more light on the nature of 'the child's mind' than all the psychologists," he validates the study of doll-play as one method through which psychologists might access the mind of the child ("Dollatry" 58).

The very title of *What Maisie Knew* seems, as Adrian Poole observes, "to make a promise" that it will provide similar access to the child's mind (vii). However, in its preface, James observes that "[s]mall children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible vocabulary" and thus isolates what becomes the central representational and thematic problem of the text, and of the project it shares with contemporary Child Study (WMK 294).

For Glenn Clifton, this prefatory remark anticipates the novel's thematic and stylistic preoccupation with language and with the disjunction between language and experience that is so central to *What Maisie Knew*. However, Clifton's analysis is inattentive to the significance of the "small children" to whom James refers. James's own study of childhood mental experience follows explorations of the same subject by many major nineteenth-century authors and coincides both with the earliest years of the first Golden Age of children's literature and with the emergence of Child Study in work by Hall, Sully, and many others.³ By specifying that "small children" are his subject, James plainly situates *What Maisie Knew* within a discourse about childhood that had become increasingly prominent in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

In the context of this burgeoning interest in the mind of the child, James's statement is not only about language in itself; it must be about language for the child. It is particularly the child's vision that language cannot "translate." It is specifically what Maisie knows that is beyond what she has the terms to express. *What Maisie Knew* explores the disjunction between language and experience, as Clifton suggests, but it does so because it is a literary study of the child.

Such studies of childhood as James's *What Maisie Knew* and Sully's or Hall's psychological Child Study proliferated in response to a specific cultural and intellectual crisis. Deborah J. Coon has argued that "[t]he soul had provided the dominant explanation for human thought and behaviour since before the Christian era," but that in the aftermath of Charles Darwin's revolutionary contribution to natural sciences "[t]here was considerable pressure to abandon the soul as an explanatory mechanism" (85, 86). Selfhood became a necessary alternative to the soul and, as Carolyn Steedman claims, the clearest expression of "[this] interiorised self" was embodied in the idea of childhood in the period (5). The child, therefore, became what James Kincaid has described as a "repository" for selfhood as a newly emergent adult need in the late nineteenth century (78).

Childhood is a particularly apt forum for the exploration of selfhood because of the innocence it is supposed to embody. If selfhood as a substitute for the soul is represented by what Jacques Lacan calls the "Ideal-I," it is always "more constituent than constituted," because "the dialectical syntheses by which [the subject] must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality" is only ever partially successful: selfhood is a constituent part of a never-quite constituted self (2). By identifying language—"I"—as that which inhibits this constituted self Lacan suggests that the child might experience such an "Ideal" self because she is outside language. As Kevin Ohi argues, however, it is not the child herself, but the idea of innocence she represents, that "serves to contain difference internal to language and subjectivity" (7). That disjunction between language and experience described by Clifton is, in the late nineteenth century, often a more specific disjunction between language and selfhood, and one that the innocent child was imagined to resolve.

This is implicit in the findings of much psychological Child Study: "A Study of Dolls," for example, finds a child-mind that is innocent in a specific and contextually significant way. Many responses to Hall and Ellis's survey describe "[d]iscussions with sceptical brothers, who assert that the doll is nothing but wood, rubber, wax, etc." (Hall and Ellis 136). These assertions "are often met with a resentment as keen as that vented . . . upon those who assert cerebral, automatic or necessitarian theories of the soul" (136). The "cerebral" "theories of the soul" referred to are those theories

that, substantiated most influentially by Darwin, in fact questioned the very existence of the soul. That word, “dollatry,” which Sully coined in his study, is a more succinct articulation of the observations made by Hall and Ellis: the now-idolatrous belief in the soul is resurrected, in newly validated form, in the mind of the child.

This association of the child’s belief with religious belief suggests that Hall, Ellis, and Sully, among many others, conducted their research in response to the loss of the soul in the post-Darwin period. The breadth and intensity of interest in childhood in the final decades of the nineteenth century suggests that children represented an increasingly necessary complement to the purely scientific approach that had brought about this loss. Through the child-mind (as expressed in, for example, her dollatry), the self might be a sufficient substitute for the outdated Christian soul.

As Lynn Wardley has argued, *What Maisie Knew* is therefore “typical of its moment” in identifying childhood as a particularly significant period for a form of “self-understanding” that was consistent with nineteenth-century theories of evolution (250–51).⁴ Situating James’s novel in the context of contemporaneous Child Study indicates that what Maisie knows is in fact this innocent knowledge of self, which it was the project of Child Study—and of countless studies of childhood in literature and in science—to access. Like the child in Lacan’s “Mirror-Stage,” Maisie’s knowledge is “richer” than language and therefore serves the function of innocence Ohi describes: it transcends the difference internal to language and *therefore* contains the difference otherwise internal to selfhood. As far as Maisie’s knowledge is beyond her language, that knowledge can, paradoxically, be synonymous with her innocence. In its late nineteenth-century context, Maisie’s innocent knowledge is essentially a knowledge of self that is outside language.

This is not to suggest that the question of Maisie’s innocence is not, also, the question of the extent of her knowledge of sex. Indeed, Kerry Robinson has suggested that the very idea of innocence seems to contain “a denial of children’s sexuality” (49). However, while innocence might contain such a denial, it is not necessarily limited to or even defined by this: indeed, one of the earliest *assertions* of children’s sexuality is predicated on an idea of innocence and one that is, moreover, consistent with the particular form of innocence attributed to Maisie and to her counter-part subjects in scientific Child Study. Sigmund Freud’s “Infantile Sexuality” (1905) attributes adult forgetfulness of childhood sexuality to the child’s innocence, not of that sexuality but of language.

Freud claims that “there is no period at which the capacity for receiving and reproducing impressions is greater than precisely during the years of childhood” (41). The observation that “of all this we, when we are grown up, have no knowledge of our own” is a reference to the phenomenon of childhood amnesia. Although Freud focuses specifically on the forgetfulness of sexual “impressions,” childhood amnesia operates on all experiences up to a certain age, and as Charles Fernyhough has noted, “it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the end of childhood amnesia corresponds to the period in which small children become thoroughly verbal beings” (75). The centrality of infantile amnesia to Freud’s analysis of infantile sexuality therefore associates the loss of the child’s particularly vivid capacity for vision—the loss of innocence—not with the onset of sexuality but with the onset of language.

Therefore, James’s claim that Maisie “would have to be saved” is secondary to his subsequent remark that she might also save others by “sowing on barren strands,

through the mere fact of presence, the seed of the moral life” (WMK 292). Insofar as it is innocent of language, Maisie’s vision represents a form of selfhood that might “save” the adults around her. The “barren strands” James refers to denote both what Peter Coveney calls the “squalid, vulgar, negative” adult society represented in the text and the soulless world in which the child’s innocence—Maisie’s vision—might represent the salvation of selfhood (199).

Of course, the squalor that surrounds Maisie and the question of whether she is, ultimately, saved from it point to the risk, if not the impossibility, of accessing the child’s innocent knowledge. The promise to reveal what Maisie knew is the promise to provide insight into the knowledge of self for which Maisie is the repository. However, surrounded by moral and linguistic squalor, that innocent knowledge is always potentially, if not already, corrupted. *What Maisie Knew* therefore problematizes the project of Child Study, the culture of studying childhood, and the promise of its own title by interrogating the attempt to access the child’s innocent, inarticulate, knowledge of self.

Because it is paradoxically innocent, Maisie’s knowledge is resistant, if not antithetical, to the means by which the author—and the psychologist—might access and represent it. To need the child is to risk contaminating the very knowledge for which she is needed. The attempt to access selfhood in the child’s mind therefore presents a major difficulty in *What Maisie Knew*: an idea of innocence and the effect of adult need on that innocence are the central thematic concerns of the novel, which thus thematizes the conflict underlying the broader culture of child-study in the late nineteenth century.⁵

This conflict is represented from the opening pages in the dispute between Maisie’s parents and, eventually, step-parents. As John McCloskey observes, Maisie’s divorced parents argue over her because her “physical presence is a symbol of external propriety” (490). Adults need Maisie, initially, as a pretext for their otherwise prohibited relationships. Accordingly, Maisie’s first governess, Miss Overmore, insists that “a lady couldn’t stay with a gentleman . . . without some awfully proper reason” (WMK 25). When Maisie asks “what reason is proper?,” Beale’s response, “a long-legged stick of a tomboy: there’s none so good as that,” indicates that Maisie is in her father’s house because her presence makes Miss Overmore’s residence there “proper.” Likewise, later, it is only “in connection with herself” that “the pleasant possibility . . . of a relation . . . between [the second] Mrs Beale and Sir Claude” can arise and, again, only her presence that lends the arrangement proposed by this couple, of a “little household we three should make,” its (superficial) propriety (46, 244).

As the scandalized gossips ventriloquized in the opening chapter suggest, this is all “very shocking.” Adult need consistently exposes Maisie to morally problematic knowledge.⁶ The possible consequences of this exposure have generated some remarkably polarized analyses of the novel.⁷ Whatever the extent of Maisie’s adult knowledge at the end of the novel, her exposure to such knowledge accounts for many uncomfortable, even disturbing, moments throughout. The unsettling passage that describes Maisie’s game with her doll, Lisette, is one of the first of such moments. Maisie gradually “understood more” about the laughter of her mother’s friends, but her imitative shrieks of laughter are uncomfortably incongruous with the childish doll-play through which she comes to this understanding (26). Her demonstrably “producible” knowledge at this point is essentially, if at this moment only imitatively,

adult: Maisie is “convulsed” by the innocence she is supposed to represent (WMK 294, 26).

The concern James here represents, that the adult’s need might corrupt that which is needed, is equally evident in *Child Study*. The possibility that the child is performing for, rather than being illuminated by, the adult observer, is raised when Sully takes issue with one of Hall’s claims: the claim cannot be “conclusive,” because the data on which it is based suggest, to Sully, not the true feelings of the child in question but a “priggish ‘contrariness,’ by no means uncommon among children” (“Dollatry” 60). Hall himself had already published an extensive study, the title of which indicates his similar concerns: in “Children’s Lies” (1890), he observes that “[t]he loves of showing off and of seeming big, to attract attention or to win admiration, sometimes leads children to assume false characters” (67). In his claim that “[a] few children, especially girls, are honeycombed with morbid self-consciousness . . . and seem to have no natural character of their own,” Hall raises the possibility that, by making the child self-conscious, adult questions might obscure what they are intended to illuminate. His exasperation at this possibility is, like Sully’s, palpable.

Maeve Pearson suggests that Maisie dramatized the “inherent split . . . between a performed ideal and a more complex and inaccessible interior selfhood” (113). In doing so, Maisie dramatizes one major difficulty of *Child Study*. The performed and dissonantly adult knowledge that Maisie displays in her game with Lisette, and that the children Sully and Hall display in their “priggish contrariness” and “morbid self-consciousness,” indicates a corruption of innocence by adult need. This performed knowledge is irreconcilable with the inaccessible, unproducible knowledge—the knowledge of self—that, as children, they are imagined to represent. When Maisie offers a “performed ideal,” she embodies the effect of scrutiny on the idea of childhood in the period: performing in response to this scrutiny, children not only obscure but actually threaten the innocent knowledge that is the true objective of literary and scientific studies of children and childhood.

If its thematic concern with the effect of adult need on Maisie’s innocence engages with the difficulty of its potential corruption encountered by practitioners of *Child Study*, the stylistic challenge of *What Maisie Knew* engages with the more fundamental difficulty of its representation. James presents Maisie’s knowledge as by definition inarticulable and thus points to the corollary of that same idea of innocent childhood knowledge that is promulgated in *Child Study*: specifically, James represents the stalemate such a concept presents for attempts, literary or scientific, to access the child’s knowledge.

According to James Gargano, James’s use of “a central intelligence not altogether capable . . . of assessing and conceptualising the value of her experiences” necessitates “the wealth of authorial explanation” that characterizes *What Maisie Knew* (35). However, the moment when Maisie meets her mother’s new partner, the Captain (or “the Count,” as Sir Claude misleadingly refers to him), for the first time indicates that authorial explanations of Maisie’s knowledge are insufficient at best.⁸ The narrator describes what Maisie observes as her mother approaches her and Sir Claude:

leaving the Count apparently to come round more circuitously—an out-flanking movement, if Maisie had but known—[Ida] resumed the onset. . . .
“What are you doing with my daughter?” she demanded of her husband;

in spite of the indignant tone of which Maisie had a greater sense than ever in her life before of not being personally noticed. (106–07)

The reader cannot fail to recognize that Maisie is here used as a pretext for a confrontation between Ida and Sir Claude. However, the narrator's wish that "Maisie had but known" emphasizes that the reader's understanding of the scene is facilitated not by Maisie's assessment of it but by the narrator's. More particularly, it is the narrator's metaphorical description of the scene in terms of a battle—that is, his language—that enables the reader's understanding of the scene.

For many critics the articulate, authoritative narrative voice exemplified in this passage offers a reliable transmission of Maisie's experience.⁹ Indeed, James insists that his "own commentary," which "constantly attends and *amplifies*" Maisie's more limited "terms," is "*required* whenever those aspects about her and those parts of her experience that she understands darken off into others that she rather tormentedly misses" (WMK 294–95, emphasis mine). According to this, Maisie's presence necessitates and thus validates the capacity of the narrator to articulate, and even augment, the child's mind. In this analysis, the narrator functions as what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "an extra-artistic medium" and his "discourse" as "an artistically neutral means of communication": language is a neutral means through which an impartial narrator can articulate what Maisie knows (206). If language is this "extra-artistic medium," *What Maisie Knew* can fulfill the promise of its title, because its author has resolved the extraordinary technical challenge of representing the mind of a child by exhibiting, in language, knowledge that exists outside language.

Of course, *What Maisie Knew* does not do this. The conflict between Maisie's experience and the narrator's language is repeatedly and explicitly expressed by the narrator throughout. Far from being resolved, the problem of representing the meaning of Maisie's experience exemplifies that more fundamental conflict identified by Clifton between experience and language in general. Indeed, immediately after Ida's "onset," and the seeming clarity that that metaphor constructs for the scene, Maisie and the Captain have an exchange, the subject of which is the inadequacy of language to encompass either's experience. The Captain attempts to explain his feelings for Ida to Maisie; the explanation culminates in "a small sigh that mourned the limits of the speakable"; Maisie "found herself, in the intensity of her response, throbbing with a joy still less utterable than the essence of the Captain's admiration" (WMK 112–13). This is, of course, not unusual for Maisie. As the narrator observes, she "*had ever . . . in her mind fewer names than conceptions*" (150, emphasis mine). The Captain's momentary encounter with the limits of the speakable therefore replicates the defining condition of Maisie's mind.

The primary effect of this passage is to suggest experience that, in "intensity," is *beyond* language. This must undermine Gargano's claim that Maisie cannot conceptualize her experience because she cannot articulate it and must therefore also question the view that the narrator is a neutral medium for the communication of Maisie's mind (35). The narrator, in fact, makes it insistently clear that Maisie's perceptions exceed not only her own language but *his* language, as, for example, when he remarks that "the fullest expression we may give to Sir Claude's conduct is a poor and pale copy of the picture it presented to his young friend" (149). The narrator's "poor and pale" copy of her knowledge here indicates that what Maisie knows is beyond what

any vocabulary might communicate. Whatever knowledge the child's mind contains is by definition unproducible, not only by Maisie herself but also by the narrator.

In thus presenting the child's mind as beyond language, *What Maisie Knew* engages with the idea of childhood expressed in contemporaneous Child Study. Though nineteenth-century child psychologists like Sully and Hall do not focus particularly on child sexuality, their work anticipates Freud's suggestion that "determining" visions and impressions are received in childhood and forgotten in adulthood (41). Language, moreover, is intrinsic both to childhood vision and to adult forgetfulness of it: the child's knowledge is innocent only because, and as long as, it is inarticulable. These works not only reiterate the idea in *What Maisie Knew* of the child's unproducible knowledge, but they also point to the contextual significance of this idea. Because it is both knowledgeable and unproducible, the child-mind actually resolves an adult disjunction between language and selfhood.

In, for example, "Children's Lies," Hall claims that "[t]he fancy of some children is almost visualisation" (66). This promptly escalates into the suggestion that, for children, "[r]every . . . materialises all wishes." According to this, language and reality unify in the child's mind. To suggest that "Mr Gradgrind would war upon [this] as inimical to scientific veracity" is to suggest that science—and therefore Hall himself by association—is limited by its inability to share the child's unscientific perception (66–67).¹⁰

Sully's *Studies of Childhood* (1895) likewise represents the disjunction between language and reality as an adult experience that is particularly exposed by efforts to access the child mind and represents the child as the embodied resolution of that disjunction. Sully suggests that in childhood "spoken words as sounds for the ear have in themselves something of the immediate objective reality of all sense-impressions" (55). For children, language not only refers to a universally recognized, "objective reality" but, consequently, "to name a thing is in a sense to make it present."

Both Hall and Sully moreover make it clear that it is specifically the child who has a vision of "immediate objective reality" through language. When Hall suggests that "[w]e might almost say of children at least . . . that all their life is imagination," he claims that what children imagine to be true actually *is* true, if only to children themselves (67, emphasis mine). Similarly, Sully claims that the adult's explanations of language "rudely breaks the spell of the illusion, calling off the attention from the vision [the child] sees in the word-crystal . . . to the cold lifeless crystal itself" (*Studies of Childhood* 56). Here, what William Wordsworth calls the "meddling intellect" is embodied in the psychologist, who "mis-shapes the beauteous forms" (61) of things as they appear, by what Sully calls "a secret-child art," in the child's innocent vision (56). According to Sully and Hall, children in general not only insist on the unity of language and reality; they actually have the capacity to make present that reality in language.

Maisie epitomizes the possible unity of language and experience—of language and self—that is implicit in such studies of the child mind. For Sheila Teahan, the narrator's repeated intrusions in the first person in the second half of *What Maisie Knew* demonstrate that, "though the narrator claims merely to report what Maisie knows, he is deeply implicated in the construction of that knowledge" (220). These moments make the reader aware of the narrator's active role in the construction, in language, of Maisie's mind, and this puts under particular strain the illusion of unity

between the narrator's language and that mind.¹¹ I suggest that by thus so openly failing to sustain the illusion that he articulates Maisie's mind the narrator insists that Maisie herself has the capacity for a vision that makes present the reality of selfhood misshapen by his language.

The narrator's first intrusion in the first person coincides with a comic moment of miscommunication between Mrs. Wix and Maisie: Mrs. Wix's claim that Sir Claude "leans on me" gives Maisie "the impression of a support literally supplied by her person" (73). This "glimpse of a misconception led [Mrs. Wix] to be explicit": "the life she wanted him to take right hold of was the public: 'she,' I hasten to add, was, in this connection, not the mistress of his fate, but only Mrs. Wix herself" (73, emphasis mine). By intruding as "I" at this point, and several times afterwards, the narrator draws attention to himself and therefore to Maisie's mind as a construction in his language. Moreover, of course, he intrudes to explain. His own words, like Mrs. Wix's, obscure rather than clarify the relationship between Mrs. Wix and Sir Claude that they try to describe.

The obscurity *within* the text of Mrs. Wix's words leads to Maisie's misinterpretation. As Kenny Marotta has suggested, this misinterpretation demonstrates that Maisie "seeks, to the consternation of her elders, to connect their words to literal realities" (497). The obscurity *of* the text, which the narrator interrupts in an attempt to clarify, therefore coincides with Maisie's insistence, at this moment, on the unity of language with "literal realit[y]." The text thus questions the validity of the belief that it simultaneously suggests Maisie embodies. Maisie's belief in the unity of language and reality is, itself, what exposes Mrs. Wix's failure to validate that belief and, seemingly, what triggers the narrator's admission of his own, equivalent, failure. Maisie's belief becomes the very obstacle inhibiting Mrs. Wix's, the narrator's, and the reader's access to that belief.

Those readers who accept the narrator's words as what Bakhtin calls the "artistically neutral" means to communicate Maisie's mind therefore replicate Maisie's erroneous assumption about the relationship between Mrs. Wix's words and the reality to which they supposedly refer. That Maisie's misconception coincides with the first intrusion of the narrator in the first-person seems, therefore, to insist that the narrator's words are *not* to be viewed as the authoritative articulation of the child's mind and therefore that the text should *not* be read in the way that Maisie reads Mrs. Wix's words. Mrs. Wix's obscurity and the narrator's intrusion are not the accidental self-defeat of a writer who has attempted to advocate Maisie's—mistaken—approach to language. They are, rather, consistent with a broader cultural understanding, evident in *Child Study* as in *What Maisie Knew*, of language and selfhood as unified *only* in the mind of the child. Maisie's mind both represents the potential unity of language with reality and exposes their disunity in the adult. The novel insists that only through the child's mind is language what Bakhtin calls an "extra-artistic medium," one that connects transparently with, rather than modifying or corrupting, the literal realities to which it refers.

It is therefore telling that, immediately subsequent to that first intrusion, the narrator remarks that "these days brought on a high quickening of Maisie's direct perceptions, of her gratified sense of arriving by herself at conclusions" (WMK 75). Maisie's hope that there is an objective reality beyond language both coincides with the narrator's inability to share her hope and precedes his admission that Maisie's

perception of that reality is becoming more conclusive. Teahan suggests that the illusion that we are reading a narrative of Maisie's consciousness breaks down toward the end of the novel and with it "the representational strategy of the central consciousness" (225). What Maisie is coming "by herself" to know is the objective reality that, according to Sully, children can make present through language: it is, of course, only by being inarticulate that Maisie's perceptions can be thus imagined. If Sully and Hall exemplify the prevalence of Maisie's hope in the unity of language and reality, they also indicate that, at the turn of the twentieth century, it was the child whose imagined vision validated this hope. The breakdown of James's representational strategy is therefore the necessary corollary to the image of the child as the embodiment of knowledge in which language and reality are unified.¹²

Maisie's knowledge of the unity of language and reality speaks to the contemporary need for selfhood to which this fascination with childhood responded. Toward the end of the novel, Mrs. Wix asks Maisie, "Haven't you really and truly *any* moral sense?" (205). As many critics have noted, the answer to this question has implications beyond the narrow conventionality that is Mrs. Wix's morality. Maisie's answer, which the narrator suggests "was vague even to imbecility," is omitted from the narrative itself. Maisie's moral sense is seemingly characterized by a deficiency and vagueness that are necessarily replicated by the narrator.

However, Maisie only "*began . . . with scarcely knowing what [a moral sense] was*" (emphasis mine). It quickly "proved something that, with scarce an outward sign . . . she could . . . strike up a sort of acquaintance with." The implication that this "sort of acquaintance" is insignificant is belied by the narrator's subsequent observation that "[n]othing more remarkable had taken place . . . no phenomenon of perception more inscrutable by our rough method, than her vision, the rest of that Boulogne day, of the manner in which she figured" (206). While the reader attempts, through this difficult and vague sentence, to solve the riddle of Maisie's moral sense, Maisie herself attains "remarkable" vision of that moral sense. Because it is inarticulate by the narrator, it is inaccessible to the reader.

The debate over how much sexual knowledge Maisie has at the end of the novel is, therefore, surely, irresolvable, but it is also misguided. Mrs. Wix's question is less about Maisie's sexual innocence and more about that innocent sense of self that might, to return to Ohi, "contain difference internal to language and subjectivity" (7). Lacan's analysis of the pre-lingual child's interaction with his image in the mirror suggests that, as an instance of non-lingual self-perception, the *I* here is consistent with the child-self because it evades the asymptotic "coming-into-being of the subject" that emerges from that discordance between "*I*" and "his own reality," between language and the adult subject (2). If, in her remarkable vision of "the manner in which she figured," Maisie similarly demonstrates a non-lingual "coming-into-being," she likewise evades the asymptotic tension between the *I* of language and the self of her own reality.

Maisie's innocent knowledge is, therefore, of the "objective reality" of the self. The conclusion toward which the text moves is therefore the moment in which she comes to see herself clearly. The narrator states that "[s]omehow, now that it was there, the great moment was not so bad. What helped the child was that she knew what she wanted. . . . Bewilderment had simply gone or at any rate was going fast" (WMK 260). Maisie seemingly discovers at this point that Sir Claude is "what she wanted." However, the declaration "I love Sir Claude" is made, firstly, "with a sense slightly

rueful and embarrassed that she appeared to offer it as something that would do as well” as claiming to love Mrs. Beale and, secondly, as “an answer to [Sir Claude’s] pats” (262). The statement “I love Sir Claude” is a response to the demands of the adults around her, not an articulation of her vision at this “great moment.” If knowing what she wants has “helped the child,” it has helped her toward a clearer vision of herself, but that vision is concealed, not expressed, by her words about Sir Claude.

This “great moment” is thus anticipated by the “moral revolution” she experiences much earlier in the text: knowing, finally, what she wants is the culmination of an idea that first occurs to her in chapter 2, when “the idea of an inner self, or, in other words, of concealment” first occurs to her (13). Just as the moral revolution that reveals to Maisie the idea of an inner self coincides and is equated with the idea and practice of concealment, so the great moment of Maisie’s self-knowledge coincides with its concealment from the reader. Maisie’s bewilderment may have “simply gone or at any rate be going fast” (260). The reader’s bewilderment remains precisely because what, if anything, Maisie has come to know is her inner self, which is, “in other words,” concealment. The culmination of Maisie’s knowledge is the culmination of her concealment: Maisie’s vision is most complete when it is least articulated.

Carren Kaston suggests that “what we finally see in the novel is Maisie’s escape from alien ‘fictions’ or versions of her experience, from the prologue’s neutralisation of her predicament, from the custodial hands and structures of various parents . . . and from the abstract version of her experience pressed upon us at times in the preface when James invokes some of those same voices and techniques” (30). What we actually see is Maisie’s vision of herself not only separated from any of the “voices” that have thus far attempted to access that self but independent of language itself. The narrator suggests that Maisie’s vision “of the manner in which she figured” is “a phenomenon of perception . . . inscrutable by our rough method” (206). The narrator’s rough method—language—is in fact antithetical to the self-knowledge Maisie here attains.

The narrator’s admission of his incapacity to communicate Maisie’s non-lingual knowledge of her own objective reality is therefore inevitable, but it also propagates the collapse of his capacity to communicate at all. The narrator admits that:

I so despair of tracing her steps that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time on a picture literally present to her. Mrs Wix saw her as a little person knowing so extraordinarily much that . . . what she still didn’t know would be ridiculous if it hadn’t been embarrassing.

The unexpected introduction of Mrs. Wix as the subject, in a passage that had seemingly referred to Maisie, marks the collapse of linguistic clarity that was anticipated in the narrator’s very first intrusion. His earlier attempt to be explicit gives way, at this stage, to despair.

However, the mention of Mrs. Wix does more than suggest “the difficulties of the narrator” in his attempt to “follow and understand” Maisie (Phillips 106). It also introduces the crucial question of Maisie’s knowledge not only of her own self but of adult selfhood. The obscurity demands that the reader ask whether the “her” in the first of these sentences is Maisie or Mrs. Wix and, by extension, whether Maisie’s remarkable vision is of the manner in which “she” (Maisie) figures to herself or of the manner in which “she” (Mrs. Wix) figures to Maisie. It is precisely the impos-

sibility of establishing which that enables Maisie's vision to be potentially either and potentially both.

Steedman argues that the nineteenth century belief in "a wholeness in interiority, that will figure itself forth, from inside to outside" finds its "location in the child": the child is the expression of "the impulse to personify ideas of the [adult] self" and enables personification of the "wholeness" of that self (15, 1). The obscurity of the narrator's language here allows for the possibility that Maisie's remarkable vision is of the "wholeness" of Mrs. Wix. As with her vision of herself, however, her vision of Mrs. Wix is most complete when most concealed. Mrs. Wix's interiority therefore only figures forth on her presence in Maisie's inarticulate vision. It is only by being inarticulate—and therefore concealed from Mrs. Wix and from the reader—that Maisie's inner world can redeem the adult self from the asymptotic disjunction between that self and the language—the "I"—through which it can be known.

It is, moreover, only as a child that Maisie's knowledge can be outside language. What Maisie knew therefore represents that repository described by Kincaid. The mind of the child is to be filled with the narrator's—and, if such explorations as "Dollatry," "A Study of Dolls," "Children's Lies," and *Studies of Childhood* are indicative, the psychologist's—imagined self-image, in which language and the self are unified, giving that self, consequently, objective reality. The "wholeness" of the interior self is figured forth on the mere presence of the child, because that presence embodies her imagined, inarticulate, and therefore innocent knowledge.

However, when Maisie actually speaks she suggests the transitory nature of the "Ideal-I." Maisie's words anticipate her entry into language and adulthood and the consequences of this entry for the imagined wholeness of the self, which, as a child, she represents. Indeed, her first words in the novel demonstrate this:

she found the words spoken by her beastly papa to be, after all, in her bewildered little ears, from which, at her mother's appeal, they passed, in her clear, shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips. "He said I was to tell you, from him," she faithfully reported, "that you're a nasty, horrid pig!" (11)

The moment is, primarily, funny (at least to the reader) because of the disjunction between Maisie's innocent, "faithful" use of language and the language itself.

This disjunction enacts Bakhtin's insistence that, rather than function as an artistically neutral means of communication, "no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme" (276). Maisie's language here points to the failure of the speaking subject to control the meaning of language in the elastic environment of her audience. Between the word "pig" and its object (Ida) and between the word "pig" and its speaking subject (Maisie) there exists the elastic environment, of which Beale's words about the same object are a part, that undermines the neutral communication of Maisie's intention when obeying her mother. Beale's words, repeated by Maisie and heard by Ida, become meaningless in themselves even as their meaning is comically apparent in the environment in which they are spoken.

For J. M. Barrie, “[n]o-one ever gets over the first unfairness . . . except Peter [Pan]” (150). If this is “the real difference” between Peter Pan and other children, then Maisie, like “all the rest,” “will never afterwards be quite the same.” Rather than conjure up an image of “objective reality,” Maisie’s language is illustrative of the social and linguistic environment in which she exists. What Barrie calls the unfairness of the disjunction between the intention behind and the effect of Maisie’s words is the first of many experiences that indicate that, unlike Peter Pan, Maisie will never quite be the same. Such moments point to the inevitability that, in Barrie’s words, “[a]ll children, except one, grow up”: Maisie has always imminently, if not already, lost her innocence (69).

Indeed, such moments indicate that, outside Neverland, the idea of the child’s innocence is necessary because it defers the certain corruption it nevertheless represents. The moment when the promise of the novel’s title is to be fulfilled expresses this contradiction. When, finally, “[t]hey stood confronted, the step-parents, still under Maisie’s observation,” the “bewilderment” that formerly characterized Maisie’s observations has implicitly “gone” or is going, and she, seemingly, sees her step-parents with perfect “deep” clarity (WMK 264). Maisie’s repeated insistence, “I know,” is, potentially, a statement of this innocent knowledge. Equally, however, that “I know” may be an instance, in language, of the same imitative behavior Maisie displayed when she “shrieked” at the innocence of her doll. Her “I know” may be as knowledgeable, as duplicitous, as the language of the adults around her. The clarity and wholeness of Maisie’s imagined vision is asserted through her repeated declaration that “I know,” but its very articulation inhibits the reader’s ability to attain similar clarity.

The reader cannot attain the same clarity of vision that Maisie seemingly attains in this scene because the only medium through which we might be able to access Maisie’s knowledge is the very medium, language, that that knowledge has transcended. Whatever Maisie knows, the reader cannot know. What, ultimately, it means for Maisie to “know” therefore remains ambivalent: Maisie’s innocence is sustained as a possibility within the very words that simultaneously suggest its corruption.

Maisie’s knowledge is therefore in doubt at the end of the novel, but it is only thus that it can remain imaginatively possible. Poole suggests that “[a] sad way of understanding the [past tense of the] title is that Maisie’s knowledge is bound to belong to the past. She knew something as a child that she will forget as a grown up” (xxii). Although Freud’s discussion of infantile amnesia refers particularly to the forgetfulness, in adulthood, of childhood sexual impressions, contemporary psychologists shared James’s wider conception of the child’s innocent knowledge. That knowledge is not specifically of sex but, more essentially, of self. Childhood innocence thus becomes the site for selfhood, the loss of which, after Darwin, was attributed to the state of adulthood.

As Poole’s use of the future tense to refer to what Maisie “will” forget in adulthood suggests, however, *her* adulthood is never quite reached. Instead of attaining an articulate adulthood, Maisie retains the innocence she embodies as a child. Instead of the certain failure of language to articulate the objective reality of the self, *What Maisie Knew* concludes with the sustained potential that the child has innocent knowledge of that self, to be forgotten in an adulthood that is indefinitely deferred.

NOTES

I would like to thank Simon James for his comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

¹Hall is most famous for his 1904 study, *Adolescence*, which “every psychologist studying adolescents today knows,” according to Arnett (186). He was a friend of Henry James’s brother, William James. See Rosenzweig (esp. 80–117) for a detailed account of their relationship. Hall’s co-author, Ellis, was a recent Ph.D. graduate and adjunct professor of pedagogy at the University of Texas. See “Ellis.”

²See Shuttleworth for a detailed account of the development of Child Study from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century and Gurjeva for an overview of Sully’s role in the professionalization of Child Study in Britain.

³Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) are two of the earliest literary studies of childhood mental experience. Hunt provides an outline of the principle authors and texts of the first Golden Age of children’s literature, within a useful overview of children’s literature from the eighteenth century to the present. See Shine and Pearson on children in other fiction by James throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Blackford discusses the correlations between and the emergence of Child Study and of experimental literary technique in the same period.

⁴Wardley’s article, which was published after my own had gone into production, discusses Maisie’s growth in the context of feminist responses to Lamarkian evolution. Its analysis suggests that questions of gender and development have a complicating significance for my analysis of the child-mind of nineteenth-century discourse.

⁵The question of how to find out what children know, without imparting that knowledge to them, is also the central dilemma of the governess in James’s “The Turn of the Screw.”

⁶In fact, Maisie is often the pretext for behavior that constitutes that problematic knowledge. When, for example, Maisie’s presence among her father’s friends invites their thinly veiled lewdness, she generates the very knowledge that threatens her innocence.

⁷Compare, for example, Wilson’s claim that Maisie ultimately offers her virginity to Sir Claude (281) with Leavis’s view that Maisie remains “to the end uninterested in, and incognizant of, sex” (130). Such commentary is unified in one respect however: Maisie’s innocence has evidently invited adults to think and talk about sex not only within the novel but also in criticism about it, performing what Ohi describes as a “discourse of child endangerment” in which the “compensations of eroticism” are perhaps acknowledged more by the adults within the text than by some of those writing about it (6).

⁸Banta identifies this as one of the most important scenes in the text, a view that is supported by the quantity of critical attention the passage has received.

⁹See, for example, Galbraith and, more recently, Sussman.

¹⁰Mr. Gradgrind is that infamous advocate, in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), of the principle that children should be educated in “nothing but Facts” (1).

¹¹Many critics similarly consider the narrator’s relationship with Maisie to be highly problematic; see, for example, Klein and Honeyman.

¹²As Teahan suggests, moreover, this breakdown seems to be propagated by Maisie’s impending adulthood. The closer Maisie comes to a capacity for articulating her knowledge, the further that knowledge seems to recede from the possibility of articulation.

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