



HAL
open science

What Maisie Knew : The portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl Mastering Language

Dennis Tredy

► **To cite this version:**

Dennis Tredy. What Maisie Knew : The portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl Mastering Language. *Cycnos*, 2017, Voyage vers la parole. *L'Enfant, les Sens, l'Acquisition du Langage*, 33 (1), pp.105-119. hal-03163749

HAL Id: hal-03163749

<https://hal.science/hal-03163749>

Submitted on 17 May 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

What Maisie Knew: The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl Mastering Language

Dennis Tredy

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3

Henry James's 1897 novel, *What Maisie Knew*, a *Bildungsroman* centered on a small child whose plight is that of a helpless "bone of contention" (James 1908, 5)¹ buffeted between divorcing parents, step-parents and other would-be guardians, is one of the author's five major works focusing on the trials and tribulations of young English women of heightened awareness but of uncertain social status, all of which were written in the immediate aftermath of the author's painful and spectacular failure as a would-be London playwright in the early 1890s. Through intense experimentation with dialogue, cross-relations, voice and point of view during this period, James sought to devise the perfect hybrid of the stage play and the novel of consciousness and symbolically staged the progressive withdrawal of his authorial presence within each of these five works of the late 1890s (*The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*, "In the Cage", "The Turn of the Screw", and *The Awkward Age*). Thus, in most of these works, James allows the young female 'centers of consciousness' to gradually wrest the control of their narratives from him as they successfully move from the status of object to that of empowered subject within their stories – with the noted exception of the governess in "The Turn of the Screw", who is given full "authority" over her text immediately after the Prologue, even though she does not have a firm grasp of the events she is reporting, resulting in James's most disturbing experiment in ambiguity and unreliable narration.

However, if the heightened sensibility of a young impressionist painter like Fleda Vetch or a surprisingly mature and cultured young woman like Nanda Brookenham seem to allow for a smooth transition of power over the narrative, in no work is the feat more remarkable, in terms of language and point of view, than in the story of little Maisie

¹ The novel *What Maisie Knew* was first published in serial form in 1897 in *Chap-Book* magazine, with a longer, revised version soon published both in serial form in *The New Review* and in book form that same year. James would again revise the novel in 1908 for the celebrated *New York Edition* of his collected works. All textual references to the novel in this study correspond to the 1908 edition.

Farange, who begins the novel as the bewildered six-year-old child of divorcing parents. James knew full well how difficult a challenge such a narrative set-up was. In the oft-quoted line from his 1908 Preface, he explains:

Small children have 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*. [...] She wonders, in other words, to the end, to the death – the death of her childhood, properly speaking; after which (*with the inevitable shift, sooner or later, of her point of view*) her situation will change and become another affair... (xi, my italics)

Thus two key aspects of Maisie's development are stressed here: (1) that there will be a gradual development and "shift" of her point of view in the novel, and (2) that this growth and rise to power will involve, or possibly be the result of, her much-needed acquisition of "terms" and "vocabulary" that she so dearly lacks at the outset.

What is most interesting about Maisie's rise to power through language acquisition, of course, is that it happens on two narrative levels, both within the narrative, as her increasing language skills allow her to rise to power over the adults in her story, and on the extradiegetic level, as James allows the child's voice to progressively overtake his authorial voice and presence. In addition, in both cases this development occurs in three clear-cut stages, concurrent with the three 'acts' the plot seems to be structured upon – that of her initiation into the bewildering world of adults, and that of her ultimate mastery of the manipulative tactics and power dynamics employed by her elders.

James goes to great lengths to stress that Maisie's initial status in the novel is that of a helpless, non-speaking *object*, as the metaphors used by the narrator to refer to the girl demonstrate: "the *partagé* child" (James 1908, 4), "the bone of contention" (5), "the little feathered shuttlecock" (14), a pawn or token in a "wild game" (19), the "tender shoot" that was "periodically uprooted" (29), etc. Similarly, the adults in her story never directly address her as 'Maisie' but instead with reifying "pet names" – the word *pet* being the operative word as the yet-silent creature is constantly referred to as an animal caged or possessed by adults. Hence her mother calls her "[m]y precious pet" (38), Mrs. Wix

expands this to “the little desperate precious pet” (104) and “[m]y own” (282), Mrs. Beale calls her “[m]y chick” (307) and Sir Claude “my poor chick” (121) and “[m]y duck” (140). One notes that when these adults are angry with the child, the notion of possession goes but the animal status remains, with epithets such as “a heartless little beast” (89), “a dirty little donkey” (156), “a little ass” (183), and “an obstinate little pig” (195). It is thus not surprising given the extensive use of these pet names that Maisie would question her own identity as an individual (Claude will finally address her as “Maisie” only in the last chapters of the novel), and that the girl’s schoolroom would feel to her “still more like a cage at a menagerie” (93).

However, Maisie will forge her own identity and become a speaking, human subject progressively throughout the novel, rising from her initial status of a silent pet or “fillette objet”, if you will, to a fully-fledged subject who looms over her adult entourage, and James has carefully staged this rise to power as the product of her acquisition of language skills.

Thus, Maisie’s progressive acquisition of knowledge is so inextricably intertwined with her acquisition of language that we could go beyond the term *Bildungsroman* and coin our own term, declaring the novel a *Spracherziehungsroman*, or a novel of *initiation into language*. For Maisie begins her story, as Millicent Bell puts it, as an “innocent” “uninitiated into language” (Bell “Les Mots...” 329), and we thereafter witness her enter the Symbolic order and slowly go from silent object to speaking subject – for if Maisie knows anything at the end of the novel, it is how to master the nuances of language, of both sliding and empty signifiers. As the critic Mary Cross puts it:

What Maisie knows, eventually, is not some fact or figure but the truth about language; that it may be made to carry far from its referent, that it has a double nature, and that the raw facts of human behavior can be made somehow more acceptable by it. (Cross 75)

James was so attentive to this aspect of Maisie’s development that he gave her three clear stages of linear development (corresponding to the apparent three ‘acts’ in the plot), for Stage I presents her *initiation*, Stage II her *apprenticeship*, and Stage III her *mastery*.

Stage 1: Initiation

In the first third of the novel, Maisie constantly muddles over the value and meaning of words used by adults, as she seems to begin on the threshold between the Lacanian Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order². Much of her initial status points to a pre-verbal stage of development (her condition as a silent object, as an animal or pet, her incoherent and fragmented self-image, a strong need for the recognition of others, etc.).

In a way, her parents are the ones who force Maisie into the world of language and sliding signifiers long before she is ready, by making her a messenger of hateful messages between them, with words so obscure that Maisie does not even attempt to discover their meaning. She is thus initiated into the unpredictable and *contextual* meaning of words, and she discovers that words can be used to hurt or soothe even if one has no idea of their meaning. Moddle's intervention at this stage also plays an important role in her understanding the subtleties of language: her first governess gives her a list of "nice words" for her to use to mentally replace the hateful ones of the messages, thus teaching Maisie the basics of language's shifting and *substitutional* nature, the notion that a word can replace another, even if it seems to have the opposite meaning. However, in spite of Moddle's help, Maisie decides to stop relaying messages she cannot understand and to "set her teeth like an Indian captive" (68), much to her thwarted parents' dismay. Instead, Maisie decides to "collect" such dizzying adult words in the back of her mind to use when she is old enough to understand them, or as she imagines it, to store them in a "dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play with" (12). However, as she becomes more initiated, she realizes she cannot keep signifiers stored away forever, and her apprehension grows: "The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs, old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her" (12-15). In a similar analogy, higher knowledge and

² This study will focus more on formalist elements devised by James, in terms of narrative structure and speech representation, rather than on a strict Lacanian reading of the novel. However, by basing the point-of-view character's development on language acquisition, James has opened the door to more profoundly psychoanalytical analysis based on Lacan. For an in-depth Lacanian study of the novel, please see Dennis Foster, "Maisie Supposed to Know: Amo(u)ral Analysis," *The Henry James Review* 5.3 (1984) 207-216. For Lacan's own description of a child's passage into the Symbolic Order, see *Ecrits*, 274-78.

language proficiency was also seen to her as a game of closed doors and hidden meanings, so she plays a game of role reversal, pretending to be an adult to her French doll Yvette, being as evasive on the true meaning of words and on answers to the doll-child's probing questions as adults were to her:

Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. [...] Little by little, however, she understood more, for it befell that she was enlightened by Lisette's questions, which reproduced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in the very darkness of Lisette. [...] There were at any rate things she really couldn't tell even a French doll. (33-34)

These early scenes of Maisie overcoming her apprehension of adult communication are a key starting point to the entire novel, as the story's development could be said to revolve around what Maisie knew *about language*, an apprenticeship through which she will finally manage to turn the tables.

During this stage of initiation, Maisie muses on other yet-confusing aspects of language. For example, she thinks hard on the discovery that certain apparent sets of antonyms have a relative and unstable meaning, including *small/big*, *old/young*, *man/woman* (17, 80). This is often triggered by Sir Claude's favorite pet names for Maisie, "My dear old man" and "Dear old chap" (76, 83, 85, 136). As stated above, she learns that being called an animal by an adult could show both scorn and tenderness, and that the inflection given to a word could radically change its value. Similarly, she muddles over the way mispronounced words used by her nurse Moddle or Susan Ash, because of a foreign accent or a lack of schooling, seem to diminish the words' value and relegate the speaker to a lower social rank (16, 199). She also notes that a name or label can suddenly switch to another referent, as the adults in her life keep switching titles. For example, when her governess Miss Overmore marries her father and becomes the new Mrs. Beale, Maisie notices not only that the same name may suddenly refer to someone different, but that changing the signifier seems to have radically changed the referent (here, her mild-mannered governess turned assertive stepmother).

James also shows us early on how Maisie's search for the meaning of a word used by adults often sends her on a long relay of lexical associations along the signifying chain: e.g., the first word the narrator

specifically mentions as being “stuck in her mind” was the word “toothpick”, used by an old man at a dinner party to refer to her skinny little legs; the word ‘toothpick’ sends her implicitly to the word ‘skinny’ and explicitly to the word ‘fat’, which then leads her to an image of the part of her meat that she didn’t like to eat, and she wonders what the connection could be (10). She imagines it refers to some physical “lack”, but it is thus translated, in Maisie’s mind, as a verbal one, one that she will strive to improve.

With this rudimentary understanding of the unstable nature of language, Maisie will set off on a long apprenticeship of ‘adult’ words, gathering hundreds of them into her consciousness and learning to associate and manipulate them so as to eventually gain the upper hand on those around her – without necessarily looking for a direct relationship between signifier and a set signified – something she learned was often a futile endeavor in this first stage. Later in the novel, when Maisie successfully manipulates adults through language, she will look back to the first time she understood that words could not be treated as having only one set meaning: “Nothing was less new to Maisie than the art of not thinking singly [about words]” (222-223). Words can have more than one meaning, or even none at all, as she learns in the second stage of her development.

Stage II: Apprenticeship

Throughout the second ‘act’ of Maisie’s story, before her relative coming of age during her trip to France, the narrator will stress just how many words Maisie will ‘take in’. The narrator had warned us early on that Maisie’s consciousness was a “boundless receptacle” (14) into which the words of adults would be incessantly “poured” and reworked, and as the curtain rises on the second act, he again stresses the sheer volume of words she “took in”: “...he let her “draw” him – that was another of his words; it was astonishing how many she gathered in” (77).

In addition, James used clear-cut textual markers that would allow the careful reader to draw up a catalogue of the specific words she took in. One technique involves simply putting the new word in quotation marks, or indicating where she had heard the word first used, so that words borrowed from adult characters clearly “echo” within Maisie’s free indirect discourse, as in the two following examples:

It was gathered by the child on these occasions that there was something in the situation for which her mother might “come down” on them all... (35)

Her embarrassment, of a precocious instinctive order, attached itself to the idea that this was another of the matters it was not for her, as her mother used to say, to go into. (33)

By cataloguing all words thus highlighted by James, we learn a good deal about Maisie's apprenticeship. For example, Maisie's unbridled excitement over an adult's use of the words “classes” or “subjects” shows her own thirst for knowledge and language acquisition – she is quite the motivated pupil. But the vast majority of words thus stressed as being “taken in” by Maisie demonstrate her growing understanding of verbal nuance, of the manipulation of signs and of the power of the euphemism.

Remarkably, a majority of the phrases Maisie is thus shown to mull over throughout the novel are of a grammatical form that she seems to find particularly problematic: that is, the phrasal verb. The mere number of such verbs thus highlighted in the text warrants our attention:

to put out (11)	to knock about (39)	to while away (71)
to go round (18)	to grow up (51)	to be off (75)
to take back (32)	to speak to (56)	to set off (172)
to go into (33,34)	to start off (58)	to do up (178)
to come down (35)	to leave out (70)	to bring up (201)
to pick up (39)	to go out (71)	to step out (200)

The explanation for this may be two-fold. First, for James, phrasal verbs represented the new slang of the bourgeois classes at the end of the century, neologisms quickly becoming the norm of so-called “modern” parlance. Even in James's notebooks and other writings, he often puts such phrasal verbs in quotes, as if mildly bemused or even appalled at their popularity. Perhaps he felt that if he himself was somewhat bewildered at the proliferation of these expressions, then it would be a particular difficult obstacle for an apprentice like Maisie to overcome. Second, on the most basic linguistic level, Maisie learns through these new expressions how two relatively simple and unrelated words can be combined to suggest a meaning that has nothing to do with its two verbal

components, the very nature of a phrasal verb. She thus realizes that the language of adults around her is surprisingly, at once, conjunctive and disjunctive. Maisie thus learns early on that new words can be created by manipulating and combining others, thereby changing their value and ever-elusive meaning.

The next step for Maisie is to focus on another form of expression for which the link between signifier and signified is even more elusive: that of the euphemism, and it is this lexicon that will prepare her even more thoroughly for her active role in adult conversations, as she quickly learns that a word can simultaneously be both superlative and diminutive, that bitter truths can be sugarcoated, and that others can be manipulated through an underhanded choice of words.

Among the euphemisms she absorbs are those used by adults to give an air of respectability to even their basest acts and motives. Hence “the arrangement” is the term used for the painful shared custody that turns Maisie into an emotionally battered “shuttlecock” (29, 160), or “the process” for the vindictive parents’ habit of grilling of the girl to find out what the other ex-spouse is up to (76). She learns that her parents neglect her because they have “very involved affairs” (97), that her parents and their new companions were not lovers but “knocked about together” (39), and that everything had to cater to all-powerful “public opinion” (22).

She also learns that a hyperbole may become a euphemistic modifier when used by an adult [such as “*dreadful/dreadfully*” (21), “*immense/immensely*” (21, 31) or “*splendid/splendidly*” (36, 55, 94, 162, 164)] and that it may mean absolutely anything at all, and may stress either glowing praise or harsh disapproval, depending on the circumstances. In addition, she also notices that adults sometimes place one of these euphemisms in a conversation to avert a conflict, and so Maisie plays mental role-playing games in which she tries to use them correctly, as she does on several occasions with the word “splendidly” (133, 180). She is also quite taken by euphemisms that are catch-all signifiers, such as “the thingumbob” (170) and “a what-d’ye-call-‘em” (339), and notices how her new step-parents in particular rely on such words when their *own* vocabulary fails them or when decorum prevents them from using another word.

However, there is one set of euphemisms that is given even more blatant focus in the text, as these words and expressions are in a way “key words” pointing to Maisie’s plight. Thus early on, Maisie, caught between two bitterly divorcing parents, is taught to see the world in terms of “sides” (6, 94), but she soon discovers that not only can one change

“sides” but that the sides themselves often change (from Ida vs. Beale, to Mrs. Wix vs. Miss Overmore, to Sir Claude vs. Ida, and so on). Then she learns the word “compromised”, which is clearly a status to be avoided but, paradoxically, usually refers to the truth of a situation or the true referent of a euphemism being revealed (169). She also learns that “freedom” and “being free” are very relative terms (191, 198, 229-30) – ‘free’ to do what, and why are some adults accused of being “too free” with others, or even with herself? Finally, the one thing that all adults seem to be looking to accomplish is to “square” someone who has wronged, reified or gotten the better of them (113, 121, 128, 134, 160, 165-166), yet Maisie does not interpret this as any type of vengeance but as a peaceful means of escape for both ‘sides’ from an unhealthy subject-object relationship. Maisie will of course, in her final act, “square” all of the adults in her life in the most dazzling manner.

Stage 3: Mastery

Maisie’s trip to France makes up the last ‘act’ of her story and her development, staging her final mastery of language and her new status as a ‘speaking subject’. She can finally take center stage and participate in adult conversations, and she takes full advantage of her new linguistic power. She herself realizes that her trip to France represents “a crossing of more spaces than the Channel” (202). As soon as she arrives in Boulogne-sur-Mer, she feels she has “grown older in five minutes and had by the time they reached the hotel recognised in the institutions and manners of France a multitude of affinities and messages—” and, notably, “strict features of a social order principally devoted to language” (231).

Here, the new speaking subject immediately starts to use *her own* euphemisms or equivocation, calling their flight to France “their great change” (236) and creating her own term to replace *lover* when referring to Claude’s new relationship with Miss Overmore/Mrs. Beale:

She was just – and partly for that very reason – Sir Claude's greatest intimate (“lady-intimate” was Maisie's term) [...]. (270)

She no longer simply studies ‘modern’ adult language but now employs it to her own benefit, even providing new, elusive terms for adults to use, as we see most often in her conversations with Mrs. Wix and Sir Claude that make up the bulk of the final chapters.

Thus, when Mrs. Wix joins them in Boulogne, Maisie takes on the role of guide and teacher. Maisie is surprised at her own ability to provide an appropriate euphemism to describe Sir Claude, finishing Mrs. Wix's hesitant statement for her with the word "princely," lest Mrs. Wix utter a less flattering term (259). Similarly, she also manages to use some of the modifiers she learned in the schoolroom to manipulate her aging governess and avert a possible conflict:

"Isn't it too *beautiful*?" Maisie panted back at her; a challenge with an answer to which, however, she was not ready at once. The term Maisie had used was a flash of diplomacy – to prevent at any rate Mrs. Wix's using another. (310)

The new Maisie so frequently employs such adult euphemisms that Mrs. Wix is not only bewildered, but is worried about any "moral sense" (or lack thereof) that Maisie might possess to accompany her new language skills – and this remains the aging governess's main preoccupation as the novel closes.

With Sir Claude, with whom Maisie seems to role-play more the relationship between a young couple than that between a stepfather and daughter, she similarly takes the upper hand in conversation. This time it is Maisie who avoids direct exposure of their embarrassing plight by providing the euphemism that "their affairs" are "very involved" (234). Later, when Mrs. Wix skillfully replaces the pronoun 'he' with 'they' to try to hide the news that the girl's mother has arrived in the company of her new lover, it is Maisie who sees through the ploy and jokingly remarks to Claude, with a tint of adult snobbishness "(*They...?*) *Perhaps it was her maid!*" (243). And during Claude's private discussion with Maisie in the café at the train station, Maisie shines in her mastery of language and manipulation of Sir Claude, getting the upper-hand on her suddenly speechless stepfather, the hitherto *beau-parleur* par excellence. Claude's indecent proposal (that Maisie give up her old governess and come away with them as their charge so as to legitimize their otherwise adulterous relationship in the eyes of "public opinion") is "slowly and brokenly uttered, with fidgets and falterings," but Maisie not only sees through to the heart of his proposal, she puts him in his place by pointing out his inappropriate choice of words:

[...] after the shock of the first sharpness she could see intensely its direction and follow it from point to point; all

the more that it came back to the point at which it had started. There was a word that had hummed all through it. "Do you call it a 'sacrifice'?" (335)

Maisie so dominates the exchange that she nearly convinces Claude to run away to Paris alone with her instead, a proposal she formulates by using adult slang for the occasion: ("...just to 'nip,' as she phrased it to herself, into the coupe of the train..." 343); she then makes a counter-proposal based on his misuse of the term 'sacrifice', requiring Sir Claude 'sacrifice' his lover Mrs. Beale if she were to sacrifice her long-time governess.

As Millicent Bell has pointed out in several of her studies, the reader has to deal with a 'new' Maisie, a miniature adult to some extent, in the last 'act' of the plot, as she has truly found "her own voice" (Bell "Les Mots..." 341-342, *Meaning* 258-259). She now uses language to *resist* ("Why shouldn't we be four?" 271; "Why is it immorality?" 272), to *protest* ("She's beautiful and I love her!" 276), and even to spout insulting innuendo ("Doesn't he pay you too?" 277; "Oh you're nobody!" 309). Most importantly, Maisie now manipulates language in order to impose her own will, to make her own decisions regarding her future and to escape her heretofore reification, until she ultimately dominates all of the adults around her much like the tall statue of the Golden Virgin in Boulogne-sur-Mer that the girl points out to Mrs. Wix – Maisie towers over them all. She has indeed successfully employed her new mastery of language to "square" all of the adults in her life, as she realizes in the final pages.

Maisie's Rise to Power over James's Authorial Voice

James thus took great pains to present Maisie's progressive mastery of the nuances of language as the vehicle for her shift from silent object to speaking, empowered subject within the world of her narrative, but, as mentioned in the introduction, what is just as remarkable is the manner in which this same three-stage development would also serve to allow Maisie's voice and point of view to steadily overpower and supplant James's own authorial voice. Thus Maisie similarly seems to wrest control of her narrative away from her narrator as her language acquisition and mastery progresses. In fact, on the outer narrative level, James provides us with the epitome of what the Austrian school of narratology (that of Franz Stanzel and Monika Fludernik) would call Authorial-Figural Narration, which refers to a text in which there is an

ambiguous, problematic or shifting struggle for dominance between the narrative voice and the ‘reflector’, or point-of-view character (Stanzel 185, Fludernik 214)³.

Thus James has also provided clear textual markers throughout the novel to highlight Maisie’s gradual rise to power over her own story, and three stages of her ascension correspond perfectly with the three ‘Acts’ and stages described above. In the first ‘act’, while a bewildered Maisie is first being exposed to the nuances of language for the first time, there is a total fusion of the two narrative voices and perspectives (those of Maisie and those of the unnamed Jamesian narrator), a remarkable experiment in point of view and narration that critic Douglas Jefferson has called “an ambiguous alloy of two distinct voices” (xvii). In this part of the novel, the narrator never affirms his distinct presence, never talks to the reader in the first person, and certain passages juxtapose metaphors that would come from the child and others that would come from the authorial narrator, as in these two examples:

...the child heard one of the ladies she found there – *a lady with eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes and thick black stitching, like ruled lines for musical notes on beautiful white gloves* – announce to another. [...]

...one couldn't rest with quite the same *tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling*. [...] She took refuge on *the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth*. (26-27, my italics)

Thus the reader must deal with a combination of metaphors that seem to come both from Maisie (“skipping ropes”, “tucked-in and kissed-good-night”) and from James (“ruled lines for musical notes”, “the firm

³ One should note that the Stanzelian school of narratology, which has been greatly over-shadowed by the wide-spread use of Gerard Genette’s prolific work on the subject but which regained popularity as the basis of Monika Fludernik’s 1996 manifesto on what she calls a “natural” narratology, is in many ways based on Henry James’s own research and experimentation with point of view. The term “reflector” for the point of view character in a work of fiction was of course coined by James and expanded by the Austrian school for its research on “reflectorization,” or the authorial voice’s assimilation of the discursive and/or psychological traits of the point-of-view character (Stanzel 168-72, Fludernik 192). What’s more, the school’s theoretical development of the above-cited notion of “authorial-figural narration” uses *What Maisie Knew* as its prime example (Stanzel 185-86, Fludernik 214-16).

ground of fiction” and “the blue river of truth”). However, at the end of this stage, there is a clear marker provided to show that Maisie has matured enough to gain some independence from the authorial voice:

It may indeed be said that these days brought on a high quickening of Maisie's direct perceptions, of her sense of freedom to make out things for herself. (99)

From that moment on, the narrator has a distinct presence and seems to watch and comment on Maisie from the outside. Suddenly we have the narrator speaking directly to the reader, at times even in the first person, to clarify things:

...“she” being, I hasten to add, in this connexion, not the mistress of his fate, but only Mrs. Wix herself. (97)

That she had small remembrance at present of a third illustrates, I am afraid, a temporary oblivion of Mrs. Wix... (163)

Or justifying an ellipsis or a gap in his presentation:

What turn it gave to their talk needn't here be recorded. (112)

Or to remind the reader of points he has already presented:

...Sir Claude uttered, acknowledged the source of that peril, the reassurance at which I have glanced. (113)

This was the second source – I have just alluded to the first... (162)

Thus, for the second ‘act’, while the child is in the midst of her most intense apprenticeship of language skills, the narrator *steps out of* Maisie, as it were, and joins forces with the reader, as a helpful guide, proposing explanations and possible motives – but doing so ostensibly from the outside.

By the third ‘act’, however, Maisie has clearly grown beyond the narrator’s reach thanks in great part to her remarkable mastery of language, and the authorial presence is often as bewildered as the adults

in her story as to her actual knowledge and motives. Overwhelmed, the narrator often directly addresses the reader and feigns frustration over his inability to explain or account for Maisie's conscience and her vast reserve of knowledge and secrets:

I may not even answer for it that Maisie was not aware of how, in this, Mrs. Beale failed to share his all but insurmountable distaste... [...] Oh decidedly I shall never get you to believe the number of things she saw and the number of secrets she discovered! (205)

I so despair of courting her noiseless mental footsteps here that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time forward a picture literally presented to her. (281)

Indeed, in the last 'act' Maisie has acquired the "new" and "enhanced" consciousness that James had planned for her, and she thus seems to escape from his control and its inherent reification, becoming her own subject, just as she has turned the tables on the possessive and reifying adults in her story.

Thus Maisie completes her journey from non-speaking object to a speaking subject who masters the nuances and manipulative possibilities of language, and James uses this carefully orchestrated three-stage process as the vehicle for the child's rise to power on two distinct narrative levels. Within the narrative, Maisie patiently masters the nuances of sliding and empty signifiers in language until she finally uses this knowledge to dazzle and "square" the adults in her story, thereby gaining her independence. On the extradiegetic level, she takes advantage of that same growing knowledge to gain control of her own narrative and independence from her once-nurturing authorial narrator – in both cases going from a non-speaking *fille-objet* to a full-blown, bewildering and empowered subject.

In James's 1908 Preface and in his notebooks, the author refers to Maisie's status at the end of the novel as the "death of her childhood" (*Literary Criticism* 2 1161), which is in fact, as we have seen, the loss of her innocence in terms of language. She is still a pure mirror of the subject, as all Jamesian innocents are, but her new mastery of language is the result of being an "innocent [...] saturated with knowledge" gleaned from the world of adults (James 1908, 183) – and though the title of the

work and the novel's last lines are an open and unanswered question on what Maisie actually *knew* about adult relationships, we know exactly what she now knows about *language* – James so clearly mapped it out for us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BELL, Millicent. "Les mots ne sont pas la parole : *What Maisie Knew*." *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 57.3 (July-September 1983), pp. 329-342.
- . *Meaning in Henry James*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- CROSS, Mary. *Henry James: The Contingencies of Style*, London: Macmillan, 1993.
- FLUDERNIK, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- FOSTER, Dennis. "Maisie Supposed to Know: Amo(u)ral Analysis," *The Henry James Review* 5.3 (1984), pp. 207-216.
- JAMES, Henry. *Literary Criticism, Volume II: European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition*, The Library of America Collection, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984.
- . *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, vol. XI, New York: Scribner's, 1908.
- JEFFERSON, Douglas. "Introduction." In, Henry James, *What Maisie Knew*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- LACAN, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1966.
- MEISSNER, Collin, *Henry James and the Language of Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- STANZEL, Franz Karl. *A Theory of Narrative*, Trad. Charlotte Goedsche, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

