

Sheridan College

## SOURCE: Sheridan Scholarly Output Undergraduate Research Creative Excellence

---

Faculty Publications and Scholarship

School of Communication and Literary Studies

---

Spring 2015

# More Perceptions than Terms to Translate Them: The Enigmatic Signifier and the Jamesian Unconscious in What Maisie Knew

Glenn Clifton

Sheridan College, [glenn.clifton@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:glenn.clifton@sheridancollege.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass\\_comm\\_publ](http://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass_comm_publ)

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

### SOURCE Citation

Clifton, Glenn, "More Perceptions than Terms to Translate Them: The Enigmatic Signifier and the Jamesian Unconscious in What Maisie Knew" (2015). *Faculty Publications and Scholarship*. Paper 2.

[http://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass\\_comm\\_publ/2](http://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass_comm_publ/2)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication and Literary Studies at SOURCE: Sheridan Scholarly Output Undergraduate Research Creative Excellence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of SOURCE: Sheridan Scholarly Output Undergraduate Research Creative Excellence. For more information, please contact [source@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:source@sheridancollege.ca).



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## **More Perceptions than Terms to Translate Them: The Enigmatic Signifier and the Jamesian Unconscious in What Maisie Knew**

Glenn Clifton

The Henry James Review, Volume 36, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 163-176 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/hjr.2015.0013



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hjr/summary/v036/36.2.clifton.html>

# More Perceptions than Terms to Translate Them: The Enigmatic Signifier and the Jamesian Unconscious in *What Maisie Knew*

By Glenn Clifton, *Sheridan  
College*

---

In a curious scene near the beginning of *What Maisie Knew*, Maisie is bewildered by the way her father's friends tease her. They accuse her of having thin, "toothpick" legs, and we are told that "the word stuck in her mind and contributed to her feeling from this time that she was deficient in something that would meet the general desire" (40). Taking the men's jokes seriously, Maisie can only think she is actually deficient in fat. She wonders what is wanted of her when in fact she is the object of a game in which men pinch her and have her light cigarettes, teasing her in a way that brushes up against adult sexuality. The word "toothpick" sticks itself in the teeth of Maisie's memory, leaving her to wonder how she is failing to measure up. The sexual energy that hides in the background of such teasing is beyond her comprehension.

There are several ways in which this scene might be said to function as a microcosm of the novel. The teasing sticks in Maisie's mind because it occurs in the inhospitable environment of her father's house, where she is made to understand she is not really wanted. More generally, Maisie's confused childhood is filled with forces that she does not understand but that she must nevertheless negotiate. The scene is also notable for its attention to the role played by individual signifiers in the child's absorption of signals: the word "toothpick" functions as a marker for a position in regard to "the general desire." *What Maisie Knew* is full of words that operate as complex placeholders, often marking a space for the negotiation of desires that seem at least partially unconscious. The novel pays remarkable attention to the way individual signifiers can function to either foreclose or enable access to unconscious libidinal energies.

Over the last fifteen years, scholars have turned to examine nineteenth-century writers in the context of the pre-psychoanalytic theories of the mind, and especially the unconscious, that circulated in their own time.<sup>1</sup> Henry James has received somewhat less attention in this vein than authors like Dickens or Eliot, in part because there is such a well-established history of reading him profitably in terms derived from Freudian or Lacanian analysis. An important exception is Vanessa Ryan's recent *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*, which argues that mid-Victorian models of unconscious cognition are central to James's theory of creativity. Historically, James's theoretically motivated readers have tended to be in agreement with Julie Rivkin that as the archetypal author of the novel of consciousness he was also concerned with such matters as the uncanny, transference, and repression—that is, with all the distortions and elisions of the later, psychoanalytic models of the unconscious (“Genius” 59). Such terms are foremost those of Freud's first topography, where the contents of the unconscious mind (as opposed to the preconscious) are marked by distortion and excess because they are located beneath the bar of repression. Jonathan Miller characterizes this model broadly as the “withholding” model of the unconscious. Miller argues that in the nineteenth century, by contrast, the unconscious was more commonly approached as a helpful, “enabling” dimension of consciousness (28). Though this account of the nineteenth-century science of the unconscious is somewhat too neat (an issue that I will discuss further), it accurately describes several strains of Victorian psychology, including the accounts of “unconscious cerebration” developed by William Carpenter and Francis Power Cobbe. James was aware of their work at least to some extent, for he uses the term “unconscious cerebration” himself, most notably in the preface to the New York Edition of *The American* (AN 23). Scholars have also demonstrated that James was aware of the proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, and the Victorian interest in supernaturalism overlapped substantially with the science of the unconscious mind.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is important to recall that earlier generations of critics were more likely to see James as an inheritor on the Coleridgean aesthetic of the organic, which entails yet another model of the unconscious—a model that did not appear to the Victorians as clearly distinct from medical or scientific approaches to the mind as it does to us.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the repressive or withholding model of the unconscious is undeniably appropriate to James's work of the middle and later phases and has been applied in many ways that go beyond the traditional reading of “The Turn of the Screw” as a tale of repressed sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Like the early Freud, James is pervasively concerned with the way not being able to speak about something can lend it extra psychic force. With its famous circumlocutions and delicate insinuations, James's middle and late work has a tendency to invest elision with massive emotional force. In *The Ambassadors*, for example, Strether avoids mentioning the name of the product that is the source of the Newsome fortune, just as he manages to carefully keep himself from thinking about the sexual details of Chad's affair with Madame de Vionnet. When he finally sees the truth of the affair, he realizes that he has been exerting unnoticed psychological effort to deceive himself: he had “really been trying all along to suppose nothing”; he “had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll” (AM 315). The same combination of delicacies structures *The Awkward Age*, a novel in which James elaborates the pleasure of watching people speak around both monetary figures and sexual facts in such a way that they take on an unnatural

weight. As Nanda finally says, “of course what’s so awfully unutterable is just what we most notice” (226). James has a rich sense of the way excess libidinal investment might be the result of repression and moral stricture.

I approach *What Maisie Knew*, a key text of James’s middle period commonly seen as the launching point for his “second go,”<sup>5</sup> through the lens of Jean Laplanche’s theory of the enigmatic signifier. Though this particular vocabulary was developed only recently, the theory is particularly appropriate to an understanding of the unconscious mind as a source of excessive force that can be simultaneously activated and disavowed by the force of individual signifiers. The theory has roots in James’s time. Laplanche frames his work as a re-appropriation of Freud’s early “seduction theory”—a model Freud abandoned in 1897, the same year in which *What Maisie Knew* was published. The modifications this theory undergoes through confrontation with James’s novel lead back to a broader consideration of how his work in this period might be situated in the various strands of Victorian psychological theory.

*What Maisie Knew* demonstrates James’s dual sense of the functioning of the unconscious, as both enabling *and* withholding. The exaggerated libidinal investment generated by moralistic stricture is demonstrated in the novel most directly by Maisie’s governess, Mrs. Wix, who demands that Maisie condemn the sexual exploits of the adults around her but is unwilling to explain the literal facts of sex that would evince such a condemnation. An alternate picture of the unconscious mind, however, is developed through Maisie herself, who seems to be raised in direct proximity to the sexual and egotistical needs of adults and so lives in almost complete ignorance of the regime of propriety that we commonly associate with “the Victorians.” Maisie’s highly unconventional education immerses her in the realities of adults and their conscious and unconscious desires. Instead of being implanted with the conventional anxieties of Victorian sexuality, Maisie develops what we might call the responding excess of the Jamesian perceiver. Many critics have approached Maisie as a prototype of James’s interest in consciousness and form-giving. I read her eventual understanding of the adult characters around her as a suggestion that Jamesian form arises not out of a denial of the forces of unconscious desire but out of a negotiation of them. Maisie’s education occurs primarily in and through the charged, ambiguous words that she learns from her environment. These enigmatic signifiers paradoxically appear to both traumatize her and grant her a certain maturity, allowing her to learn to neighbor the unconscious minds of others.

In the work of Jean Laplanche, enigmatic signifiers generate the unconscious mind. These signifiers are primarily the signals passed through the physical contact between parents and children. For Laplanche, such contact contains excess meaning that it cannot fully articulate and so transmits unconscious content from the parent to the infant. Laplanche argues that the desire of parents, and especially mothers, operates on children as a signifier of something to them, even though it is not clear what it is a signifier of. He writes of a “nagging question” in the infant’s mind: “what does the breast want from me, apart from wanting to suckle me, and, come to that why does it want to suckle me?” (*New* 126). Because these messages are addresses “to” the infant but without clear content, Laplanche calls them “hieroglyphs in the desert”—“we know that they signify . . . but we do not necessarily have a signified we can ascribe to them” (45).<sup>6</sup> The enigmatic “hieroglyphic” messages, full of hidden content, transfer the excessive energy of the unconscious drive from one generation to

the next, like Trojan horses of the unconscious. Laplanche characterizes the infant's experience of them as "the breaking in of an 'excess of message,' emanating from the other, which functions like pain" (*Essays* 211). It must be emphasized that this traumatic contact only occurs because the parents themselves have unconscious minds and cannot master or know their own drives in such a manner as would prevent their touches and signals from baffling the infant.

While Laplanche's account might seem to replicate Freud's tendency to make universalizing, trans-historical assertions about family structures, in fact he does not ignore the social, historically contingent dimensions of how the unconscious is implanted. He notes for example that varying gender roles are inevitably a part of the excess messages adults transfer to children (Fletcher and Osborne 36–37). Laplanche tends to describe the enigmatic signifier as primarily a matter of physical contact, but he also shifts his tone in some passages and discusses such scenes as emblematic focal points for all forms of the transmission of messages of the adult world to the child. He defends his theory in an interview, for example, by saying that "a child can become human and be educated without parents, but not without receiving adult messages" (Fletcher and Osborne 36). Similarly, he defines his "primal" situation as simply the child's confrontation with the messages of the adult world (*New* 89–90). Yet despite the verbal nature of much of a child's contact with adults, he insists on the primacy of the physical contact between parents and children as the bearer of messages and objects to models that would emphasize the linguistic in accounting for the unconscious.<sup>7</sup>

Other contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers, including Jonathan Lear and Eric Santner, have adapted Laplanche's account but emphasized instead the linguistic and ideological possibilities of the "enigmatic signifier." Santner in particular has argued that the social norms that sustain individual identity are powered by the excess excitation of the mind in response to the linguistic enigmatic signifier.<sup>8</sup> For Santner, the traumatic excess imprinted on the mind in infancy is later invested in social norms (49–51). That is, there is an uncanny surplus energy in one's desire to be regarded as a "good" man or woman, a good professor or banker, a good father or mother that borrows from the unconscious energy first implanted by the hieroglyphic messages of infancy. In this linguistic account of the enigmatic signifier what matters is the relationship between the forces of the unconscious and certain more-or-less empty words that both excite and contain that excess. We might think for example of the surplus energy available to defend amorphous terms such as "morality" or "America." These words, I suggest, have a certain poverty. An enthusiastic citizen's emotional energy for "America" may actually run against the grain of a reasoned account of what is positive about that country.

Thus, for Santner, enigmatic signifiers sustain social norms and ideologies primarily through tautological emptiness: the law is the law, morality is morality. Enigmatic signifiers are understood on this model as both exciting unconscious energy and then disavowing that excitement through their emptiness. By normalizing our unconscious stimulation and directing it toward legitimate targets, the work of the enigmatic signifier includes a denial that there is anything excessive about our enthusiasm. Santner punningly calls this reference to established social norms the structure of the "ego and the *ibid*" (50), as there is a need for the subject to cite a legitimate hieroglyphic signifier in order to demonstrate that her experience and enjoyment

of the excess energies of the unconscious is justified. Excess energy is legitimate if diverted toward a “good cause” (or a local sports team), because it has disavowed its unruly unconscious origins.

In *What Maisie Knew* we see this normalized containment of unconscious energy—though I will argue that we see it primarily through Maisie’s governess, Mrs. Wix. Mrs. Wix insists upon “moral sense,” and her own desire seems to be sublimated through her judgmental use of this term. Maisie, by contrast, receives a perverse education, in which the excessive energy of the words she learns can be confronted directly. Maisie is not so much exposed to the empty tautology of culturally charged words as the ambiguous fullness of signifiers that, while linguistic, also have the “Trojan horse” quality of Laplanche’s physical signals. She is not immersed in empty, ideologically charged terms but in sexually charged ones that resemble Laplanche’s excessive signals. These signifiers do not attempt to legitimate social norms but instead serve as placeholders for the libidinal energy that defines the complex situations that Maisie is trying to unravel.

If the empty hieroglyph operates on the principle of “the ego and the ibid,” that is, in terms of citation, then *What Maisie Knew* provides a curious counterpoint, for Maisie struggles for sources to cite. Maisie’s early childhood is organized without any stable place for her to stand and, in a sense, without any role models. The manner in which she is raised means she is constantly close to the complexities of the adult world. She is not spoken to like a child and rarely hears the discourses her culture holds ready-made for children. If all childhoods are marked by ambiguous and sexually charged signals from the adult world—“hieroglyphs in the desert”—then in Maisie’s peculiar childhood that problem is magnified to the point of becoming entirely explicit, unmediated by ideological content. Maisie’s childhood is “phantasmagoric” (WMK 39) because virtually every signifier is an enigmatically charged signifier.

Returning to the “toothpick” scene, we can see how James’s attention to the confusing power of a particular word resembles Laplanche’s general assessment of the primal situation: a child’s confrontation with the enigma of the adult world. Maisie is always running behind in understanding her situation. She experiences a backlog of meanings she must continually catch up with: “she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn’t yet big enough to play” (41). These shapes later begin to move and to take on a dangerous aspect, making Maisie realize she has to disguise her understanding in order to keep herself from being used as a weapon. She knows that the signifiers are dangerous because she sees their effects, even while not understanding their significance. At first, this leads to a sense of responsibility. Maisie develops a strategy of concealment based in guilt, in a striking anticipation of a narrative about children and divorce that would become broadly familiar only in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> On one level, James certainly intends Maisie’s situation to be more pitiable than exemplary. She experiences a considerable sense of loss in the midst of her strategizing. The scene in the park where she feels overwhelmed with the beauty of finally hearing someone speak well of her mother provides an important reminder of James’s attentiveness to the feelings of absence that attend Maisie’s essential abandonment at the hands of the adult world. But her sense of responsibility and her survivalist’s need for interpretive acumen also provide James with an opportunity to trace the development of a char-



acter removed from the conventional buffers that keep us from the excess energies of the unconscious mind.

James is constantly attentive to the emotional investment lurking in individual words. When Maisie is taken to France, for example, James presents the word “abroad” as an emblem of her desire for adulthood, cultivation, and experience:

She was “abroad” and she gave herself up to it, responded to it, in the bright air, before the pink houses, among the bare-legged fishwives and the red-legged soldiers, with the instant certitude of a vocation. Her vocation was to see the world and to thrill with enjoyment of the picture; she had grown older in five minutes and had by the time they reached the hotel recognized in the institutions and manners of France a multitude of affinities and messages. (181)

James’s quotation marks draw our attention to the charged nature of the individual word. His use of Free Indirect Discourse in phrases such as “she had grown older in five minutes” highlights the way his characters construct their reality out of the desires they have invested in such terms—for this is how Maisie wishes to see herself.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the novel James depicts two aspects of Maisie’s education, one that has more relation to the conventional, empty hieroglyph and the other to the overfull signifier: we see both how Maisie wants to believe herself to be experiencing wonderful perceptions and how she actually perceives. This scene stages the former: Maisie here experiences what Santner calls “the ego and the *ibid.*” The signifier “abroad” communicates a socially acceptable ideal; Maisie is, at this moment, experiencing something like normal socialization as she attempts to picture herself as sensitive, cultured, and adult.

But the novel is also full of signifiers that work in nearly the opposite manner, functioning not as purveyors of ideals but as complex placeholders for things Maisie cannot yet comprehend. James writes in his preface that “small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them” (AN 145), and, accordingly, there are many words in the novel that do the work of approximating, hinting at, and euphemizing experiences of desire. Terms such as “squared,” “free,” and “bolt” play complex roles like this (135, 215, 153). These words, while not inherently sexual, refer in their contexts to sexual aspects of the adults’ lives. Because these situations are neither properly explained to Maisie nor hidden from her, such terms are all she has. Most of these words are euphemisms that only half succeed in euphemizing their content. Thus she must work her way around the word “compromised,” which she has been able to rattle off since the age of five (141). Maisie gives no indication of knowing the precise facts of sexual intercourse that the word “compromised” suggests, but neither does she have any other literal meaning to ascribe to it—it is simply part of the air she breathes. “She knew as well in short that a person could be compromised as that a person could be slapped with a hair-brush or left alone in the dark.”

There are many other words Maisie is able to use quite successfully by working around the sexual content they intimate, such as “squared” (135). In the scene in the park where Maisie and Claude run into Ida, she can tell from Claude’s demeanor when he returns from speaking to her mother that the conversation has “drawn blood” (133). Because of this, she further knows that no one has really been “squared.” She



does not fully understand that the word also hints, in this context, at the permission to have sexual affairs, but since she is able to apply it successfully she must understand something of the emotional investments involved in it.<sup>11</sup> The word is not an empty hieroglyph but rather a placeholder with which Maisie navigates what she is able to observe without words. Such terms are pointers toward the perceptions that language cannot accommodate directly.

Because these words are full of hidden content, there is a secret strength to the vagueness with which Maisie learns to use language, allowing it to include both silence and an awareness of continuing process. Thus, when Maisie fails to understand Mrs. Wix's despondency over the fact that Sir Claude has been seeing Mrs. Beale, "her general consciousness of the way things could be both perpetrated and resented always eased off for her the strain of the particular mystery" (107). Without understanding the precise referent of the adult words, she is directed toward only observing their effect on others. Maisie is more than once compared to a child leaning up against a glass (101, 120). In fact, because so little is mediated for her, she becomes almost entirely an observer of others. Her confusion also leads to a rigorous practice of attention.

James has a tendency in this period of his career to simultaneously stage his fears of moral degeneration and reveal the impossibility and falseness of the older regime of morals. In *The Awkward Age*, for example, Mr. Longdon provides ample opportunity to express the fear that shifts in customs represent a sharp decline, while the novel as a whole suggests that nostalgia is impotent in the face of change and that the "sacred rage" for an older moral order is frequently detrimental. Similarly, in *What Maisie Knew*, if Maisie's pitiable situation and her parents' flabby, cartoonish egotism express a fear of moral degeneracy, it is Mrs. Wix who provides an opportunity to stage the hypocrisy of moralism. Mrs. Wix experiences language almost entirely through the conventional, ideological form of the enigmatic signifier. Her heavy-handed application of a "moral sense" requires precisely that her words be given a legitimacy that she cannot account for. Indeed, she cannot even explain the legitimacy her words should have, since she expects Maisie to condemn illicit sexuality without ever having it explained. In one scene, Mrs. Wix pressures Maisie to "condemn" Claude's affair, calling it a "crime" because it is branded such by the Bible. But Maisie can only barely stop herself from responding that Claude is allowed to behave in this way because now he is "free" (215). "Crime" functions here as an empty, ideological signifier, designed to foreclose further inquiry, while "free" is an overfull one, laden with the emotional content—which Maisie has overheard and understood—of Claude's very adult joy at his release from fidelity. The conflict between these two signifiers produces a repetitive scene. Maisie keeps crashing against Mrs. Wix's use of the word "crime" as the two types of adult content fail to mix.

If Mrs. Wix is representative of conventional morality, she is also representative, then, of the conventional signifier, directing desire toward an abstract ideal. But James wants us to see the cost involved in her denial of excess psychological vitality. While most critics recognize how negatively the moralistic perspective is portrayed in the novel through Mrs. Wix's "deep, narrow passion" (163) for morality, they rarely consider the importance of Mrs. Wix's own sexuality. Her psychological complexity is one of the great under-appreciated elements of the novel.<sup>12</sup> James makes it clear that she also desires Claude in a way that her own moralizing cannot confront. She admits to being jealous and seeks the comfort of having Maisie share in her jealousy (216).

Mrs. Wix's mission to save Claude from the "horrors" of Mrs. Beale is motivated by envy but disguises itself as a moral crusade (this is not to say that James does not represent Mrs. Beale as a source of genuine ethical danger as well). And that is why when Claude points out an inconsistency in Mrs. Wix's moral reasoning, asking why she is upset that Mrs. Beale is "free" but glad that he himself is, she reacts thusly:

Mrs Wix met this challenge first with silence, then with a demonstration the most extraordinary, the most unexpected. Maisie could scarcely believe her eyes as she saw the good lady, with whom she had associated no faintest shade of any art of provocation, actually, after an upward grimace, give Sir Claude a great giggling insinuating naughty slap. "You wretch—you *know* why!" (197)

Maisie's surprise is also, presumably, the reader's: it is highly uncharacteristic for a person of Mrs. Wix's demeanor to give a "giggling insinuating naughty" slap. Losing control, Mrs. Wix flashes into the flirtatious gesture of a little girl. The excess force of her psyche, immobilized by conventional hieroglyphs, expresses itself in a sloppy, uncharacteristic manner. This undermines Mrs. Wix's moral position. More important, it betrays the effort of repression that James wants us to understand goes into manufacturing her moments of high dignity. It is a critical commonplace to note that as the wearer of "straighteners," Mrs. Wix is a representative of the straight and narrow path. But I would argue that the straighteners are an emblem of Mrs. Wix in a more precise sense, as their actual function is to make what is a crooked, perhaps illicit glance appear straight to others. These glasses are, after all, "put on for the sake of others, whom, as she believed, they helped to recognize the bearing, otherwise doubtful, of her regard" (49).

In discussing the "beautifying light" Maisie sheds on the adult characters, James writes in his preface to the New York Edition that the two scenes that achieve "the maximum effect of associational magic" are those between Maisie and the Captain in the park and between Maisie and her father (AN 147–48). Each essentially figures one of Maisie's parents as a melancholic object. Maisie experiences her parents as glorious even while experiencing them as lost. It is the second of these scenes, however, that also emphasizes Maisie's powers of perception. In this startling encounter, Maisie's father silently asks her to repudiate him so that he can abandon her with a clean conscience. At first, Maisie feels a certain plenitude in the presence of her father, much as she had during the discussion with the Captain in the park. James explicitly parallels the two scenes, not only in the preface but in the text itself. The Captain tells Maisie that her mother is a "splendid woman" (129). And Maisie, feeling the desire for a parallel moment, finds one in her father's pitiable attempt to pretend he knows her:

The tears came into her eyes again as they had done when in the Park that day when the Captain told her so "splendidly" that her mother was good. What was this but splendid too—this still directer goodness of her father and this unexampled shining solitude with him, out of which everything had dropped but that he was papa and that he was magnificent? (148–49)

As the scene continues, however, Maisie also discerns her father's strategy, coming to realize that her father wants her to repudiate him. What emerges is a connection between consciousnesses, conducted in silence:

Then she understood as well as if he had spoken it that what he wanted, hang it, was that she should let him off . . . with all the appearance of virtue and sacrifice on his side. It was exactly as if he had broken out to her: "I say, you little booby, help me to be irreproachable, to be noble, and yet to have none of the beastly bore of it. There's only impropriety enough for one of us; so *you* must take it all. *Repudiate* your dear old daddy—in the face, mind you, of his tender supplications. He can't be rough with you—it isn't in his nature: therefore you'll have successfully chucked him because he was too generous to be as firm with you, poor man, as was, after all, his duty." This was what he communicated in a series of tremendous pats on the back. (153)

While this passage is not technically Free Indirect Discourse, it retains many of its characteristics since it is fundamentally from Maisie's point of view (the phrase "hang it," appearing before the quotation mark, is Free Indirect Discourse).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as improbable as it may seem that a series of pats on the back could communicate such a detailed message, part of what makes the passage sound like Free Indirect Discourse is that Maisie is clearly embellishing in her father's voice. Phrases like "it isn't in his nature" or "your dear old daddy" are extensions, cast in her father's voice, of the literal message she receives.

Maisie's imagining of her father's words is not ironized. James seems to want us to understand that her perception here is more or less accurate. At the same time, this is not simply a moment in which perception registers what is objectively there. Rather, Maisie's active participation is required to elucidate what her father is thinking. That is, this moment depicts a thoroughly intersubjective experience, in which Maisie is active but permeated by the voice of another person.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the scene suggests that Maisie understands her father in a fuller way than he could articulate at this moment, for I believe we are to take Beale as only half-conscious of his strategy. If Maisie didn't understand what was happening, no one would fully understand it, including Beale. Without this passage wherein Maisie "hears" her father's silent voice, the encounter would be highly confusing. James has constructed the scene so that she is out ahead of the reader. Much as earlier in the book Mrs. Wix's idea to "save" Claude leaps ahead of Maisie's understanding like a kangaroo (95), here James wants to make it seem that Maisie leaps ahead of the reader. But whereas Mrs. Wix's leap was based on the legitimacy of a hieroglyphic signifier, Maisie's is entirely concrete, based in the perception of Beale's presence and his bodily contact. Beale's gesture here functions as an overfull signifier. In what we might consider a striking reversal of Laplanche's primal scene, wherein the physical contact between parents and children produces enigmas, the physical contact between Maisie and her father here communicates a concrete, comprehensible, if also highly upsetting message. Maisie's immersion in the excess of adult desire has led to a condition where her unconscious has become responsive: she knows more than the adults are willing to say.

This responsive unconscious also figures at the novel's climax, when Maisie proposes to Sir Claude that she will give up Mrs. Wix if he gives up Mrs. Beale. Claude proclaims that her proposal is "beautiful," a refined and great work of art (262). This scene has engendered many forms of suspicion concerning James's aesthetic goals and moral fiber. Harris W. Wilson argued in a notorious 1956 article that Maisie was offering her virginity to Sir Claude, claiming there was "no other explanation for the highly emotional content of the scenes that occur when [Maisie] and Claude return, after their breakfast, to Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale" (281). For the next decades, critics who celebrated the novel felt bound to refute this argument. While contemporary criticism has set aside this moralistic language, theoretically informed critics of the 1980s and '90s often had their own reasons to be suspicious of this final proposal, since it seemed to figure as the capstone of Maisie's development into a prototypical Jamesian "master"—an artist capable of withdrawing from social engagement and shaping the world with aesthetic authority.<sup>15</sup> If Maisie's consciousness, as James claims in the preface, lends a beauty to the shoddiness of the adults, is this beauty an aesthetic veneer by which James asserts the transcendence of the realm of art?

If we cast Maisie's proposal instead in terms of the responsive unconscious, what emerges is James's attempt to describe what it would be like to understand, and perhaps even "appreciate" in an aesthetic sense, the excess unconscious desires of another person. As Santner notes, "the Other to whom I am answerable *has an unconscious*" (82). Maisie's proposal does bring the novel to an end with a certain aesthetic parallelism, but the fact that her proposal is not accepted also speaks to the failure of desire to be contained by form. When Claude finds the proposal beautiful, he is not simply reflecting on the matter of elegant structure. Rather, he understands that he is understood. We might say he is humbled. Mrs. Beale has power over Claude: this is part of the source of Mrs. Wix's jealousy. In the scenes leading up to the novel's climax, Maisie and Claude share an awareness that they are both afraid of themselves. For Maisie to understand Claude here is for her to understand the forces of psychic excess through which he is invested in his relationship with Mrs. Beale, rendering him too weak to leave. Maisie and Claude share a comprehension about this weakness in silence: "it was Sir Claude who cultivated the supreme stillness by which she knew best what he meant. He simply meant that he knew all she herself meant" (255). Again, "they exchanged silences . . . but only exchanged silences." James refers to a silence like the one between Maisie and her father, suggesting a form of intersubjective connection.

When Maisie's proposal is revealed to Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale, the psychological desires of these women are brought into direct conflict. In contrast to Wilson's assertion that aside from Maisie offering her virginity there could be "no other explanation" (281) for the intensity of this scene, we must think of the inherent excess of the forms of desire involved. The jealous Mrs. Wix is pushed to a state of passive-aggressive despair as she watches Maisie's proposal finalize her own loss of Claude. Relying on her moralistic terms, Mrs. Wix insists that Maisie's moral sense has been "nipped . . . in the bud" (260). Claude counters with an enthusiasm for the beautiful thing that apparently has been cultivated: "'What do you call that but exquisite?' Sir Claude demanded of all of them . . . speaking with a relish as intense now as if some lovely work of art or of nature had suddenly been set down among them" (262). Claude knows that he will say no to Maisie's proposal, and he knows that Maisie

knows this. His weakness is handed back to him as an image he can recognize. Sir Claude sees reflected in Maisie's proposal a circumscribing of his weakness and an understanding that living with Mrs. Beale would likely lead Maisie to be abandoned again; he says with the "oddest quietness" that Maisie hates Mrs. Beale (264). Admitting his weakness, he repeats Mrs. Wix's exclamation that "he can't" give up Mrs. Beale: "'He can't, he can't, he can't!'"—Sir Claude's gay emphasis wonderfully carried it off" (266). Claude's description of himself, repeating the other characters' words but retaining the third person, suggests he is seeing himself from the outside, hearing his own surplus unconscious desire as Maisie earlier heard her father's.

If we can describe Maisie as an exemplar of a "responsive" unconscious, developing in reaction to the excess desires of the adults around her, how might this be situated in Victorian discourses of the unconscious? I began with Jonathan Miller's description of the "enabling" model of the Victorian unconscious as opposed to the Freudian "withholding" model. Miller praises the Victorian approach for its greater resemblance to later twentieth-century models of cognitive psychology and blames Freud for having delayed the scientific understanding of the way our unconscious minds work to assist everyday processing (28). Miller's account is persuasive as applied to certain nineteenth-century psychologists. Compared to Freud, William Carpenter and Francis Power Cobbe sound nearly quaint in their descriptions of the functioning of the unconscious mind. Their recurrent proof of the existence of an unconscious is that sometimes we remember a name we have forgotten only when we have stopped trying (Cobbe 308; Carpenter 519). Cobbe even uses the existence of the unconscious to defend the existence of the afterlife, arguing that it is only the workaday, conscious part of the mind that is embodied and mortal (306).

But as Jill Matus has noted, Miller's distinction between the two types of unconscious overlooks a considerable Victorian anxiety about the hidden contents of the mind (35). Miller's account is based primarily on British figures such as Laycock, Carpenter, Hamilton, and Mill. Evelyne Ender, however, argues for Henry James's relationship to early nineteenth-century French theorists of hysteria, who do not fit Miller's model at all. Ender notes that the highly gendered models arising from French doctors such as Voisin, Virey, and Briquet are not only steeped in the notion that the unconscious is withholding something from a conscious (female) person but are also singularly defined by excess. As Ender writes, "for these doctors, the origin of hysteria lies in some inherent predisposition: the hysteric is more easily affected . . . because endowed with a surplus of some quality such as passion (for Voisin), sensibility (Virey), nervous excitability (Brachet), or impressionability (Briquet)" (31). Later psychoanalytic accounts of the unconscious, starting with Freud's, preserve this notion of excess as the inevitable corollary of the repressive hypothesis. Indeed, contemporary thinkers who would oppose the encroaching universality of the cognitive model that Miller espouses tend to describe the unconscious mind as if "excess" were nearly its sole feature. In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Laplanche emphatically characterizes the origin of the unconscious in the infant's experience of "Too much" otherness. Santner goes further, claiming that psychoanalysis opens us to the "constitutive 'too-muchness'" of the psyche: the human mind is by definition "the bearer of an excess, a too much of pressure that is not merely physiological" (8).

Between French theories of hysteria and the general anxiety surrounding excess emotion that they bespeak, James had many potential sources for the repressive ele-

ments of his representations of the unconscious. I have noted already James's use of the term "unconscious cerebration" in the preface to *The American*. The context of this remark insinuates an account of a slowly steeping force of creativity ("the deep well of unconscious cerebration" [AN 23]). Vanessa Ryan finds the source for James's depiction of pre-conscious cognition in Victorian work on bodily, non-conscious sentience (105–25). Ryan's reading adds an important element to our understanding of James's model of thinking. But there are also passages in James where images of non-conscious processing suggest the influence of a Romantic understanding of the unconscious, wherein creativity is partially unconscious because it is organic rather than mechanical—a distinction that later theorists of unconscious cerebration abandoned (Ryan 91).

I noted that earlier generations of scholars often praised James for his adherence to Coleridgean organicism. I am not concerned to enter a debate about the extent of James's "Romanticism," with all the baggage that entails. What interests me is that James's later accounts of his own creativity often draw on this organic model of the Romantic unconscious even while describing something "excessive" about the creative mind. In the prefaces to the New York Edition, virtually all of James's books are cast as rising from "germs" that they then grow beyond with a pace and scale that seem to shock their author. Their organic growth seems to contain both the wholeness of a finished organism and the excess force of a tropical plant that never stops growing. In his preface to *The Awkward Age*, James notes the "quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and cover the ground when conditions happen to favour it" (AN 98). He describes the novel as one of his many books that, guided by "an unforeseen principle of growth[,] have become "comparative monsters." The writer who finds such a germ is "terribly at the mercy of his mind. That organ has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications beyond reckoning" (101). There is certainly a boast in this claim to a tropical mind. James insinuates that his mind is so encouraging to growth that the novel is almost beyond the reader's fathoming. Yet the metaphor combines two trajectories in a striking way: while the growth is organically synthesized, it is also excessive and beyond the power of the conscious. James is at the mercy of his brain; he can only hold on tight and make discriminations later.

What we are left with, then, is an "enabling" excess. James's hybrid account of the unconscious is arguably not far from some aspects of Freud's, since Freud also accounted for the origins of creativity in the repressive unconscious in works such as his biography of Da Vinci. But the excess in the preface to *The Awkward Age* is not a sublimation: James's boast seems to be that his tropical unconscious is amenable to nearly any kind of growth but, most particularly, to the growth of connections that have correspondence in reality. If connections, in reality, stop nowhere, the creative unconscious is humid because it is responsive to the density of reality. James's claim is that, like Maisie, he overhears and responds to what is unspoken. If Mrs. Wix is governed by the "moralistic" unconscious, Maisie seems to have something of a "responsive" unconscious that includes the voices of others. This responsive excess has the capacity to navigate and perhaps to include the surplus energies smothered beneath the moralistic scruples of other characters. Such an understanding of the unconscious mind, though it may draw on the natural imagery of an organic genius, is pre-eminently social. For the "responsive" dimension of the Jamesian unconscious



does not respond with the individualized pattern of a specific sublimation but with an immersion—an attendance to excess desire *as such* and, therefore, to the intractably social processes by which desires are able to circulate without ever becoming fully conscious.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Helpful works include Taylor, Matus, and Logan. Shuttleworth and Taylor's anthology gathers the source texts for this research.

<sup>2</sup>Lustig summarizes the scholarship on the relationship between James's "ghostly" tales and Victorian supernaturalism (86–89).

<sup>3</sup>Wellek argued in 1958 that "James alone in his time and place in the English speaking world holds fast to the insights of organicistic aesthetics and thus constitutes a bridge from the early nineteenth century to modern criticism" (321). The unconscious dimension of organicism is rarely emphasized by these critics, though when Coleridge first defines the organic against the mechanical he connects the organic clearly to the unconscious. He calls Shakespeare "a nature humanized, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and implicit wisdom deeper than consciousness" (224). James's account of his creative process, discussed in the conclusion to this article, also describes the conscious direction of unconscious forces.

<sup>4</sup>Notable works include Felman, Rowe (119–46), Przybyłowicz, and Bersani. Rivkin's recent review essay ("Genius") summarizes this field and draws particular attention to the applications of psychoanalytic theory to queer studies of James.

<sup>5</sup>James's biographers are inevitably drawn to see *What Maisie Knew* as a source of creative renewal after the disastrous failure of *Guy Domville* in 1895. Edel notoriously went further, arguing that the sequence of books about precocious girls James wrote in the later 1890s constituted a form of therapy through which James re-envisioned his creative powers and confronted his doubts about his "masculinity" (476–82).

<sup>6</sup>Lacan uses the term "enigmatic signifier," but without elaborating a full theory about it (159–60). The phrase "hieroglyphs in the desert" is also borrowed from Lacan, who uses it in a different context in a 1958 essay, "On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis" (194).

<sup>7</sup>Laplanche thus objects to Lacan's "linguistic" model of the unconscious, claiming that: 1) infants are primarily absorbing non-verbal signals; and 2) such a model effaces the gap between the "I" and the Other by absorbing both into trans-individual structures (*Essays* 73). The latter point is an indication of just how far Laplanche is influenced by French philosophies that stress the ethical valences of "otherness." Laplanche consistently critiques both Freud and Lacan for failing to hold fast to the "Copernican Revolution" of psychoanalysis, which should ensure the centrality of otherness within the individual self (see 52–83). Though Laplanche does not present his claims as primarily ethical ones, he does consider the ethical import they might have, particularly in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (6–7).

<sup>8</sup>Lear articulates a parallel view, giving philosophical examples of the power of the enigmatic signifier. Lear argues that "happiness" for Aristotle and "death" for Freud function as enigmatic, circularly defined terms that seduce both thinker and reader alike.

<sup>9</sup>Thus when Maisie hears her parents fighting: "She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she has been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so" (43).

<sup>10</sup>Rowe argues that there is no such thing as a moment of "pure" perception in James; the wishes and imagination of the perceiving subject are always involved in constructing the perception. For Rowe, this is James's strength as a writer of historical consciousness: he realizes that perception is always governed by a "will to meaning" (201). But of course, the fact that one's desires are involved in perception does not mean nothing can ever be insightfully registered.

<sup>11</sup>Rivkin argues that what Maisie really learns about language is that words mean things contextually rather than absolutely (*False* 144–45). I note that this is especially the case with pronouns in the novel, which function as shifting but emotionally loaded signifiers. Thus, "there had been years at Beale Farange's when the monosyllable 'he' meant always, meant almost violently, the master; but all that was changed at a period at which Sir Claude's merits were of themselves so much in the air that it scarce took even two letters to name him" (*WMK* 137).

<sup>12</sup>A recent exception is Hadley's analysis of the character (47–50).

<sup>13</sup>I say the passage is not quite Free Indirect Discourse (FID) because it is an imagined quotation in the first person, and most definitions of FID restrict it to the third person (Rimmon-Kenan 112). It is notable, however, that a technique resembling FID steps in to articulate a state of intersubjectivity; some have argued that FID is itself an intersubjective phenomenon. Rimmon-Kenan notes that one of the effects of FID is to enhance "the bivocality or polyvocality of speakers and attitudes" (113).

<sup>14</sup>Cameron has argued for the emergence of an intersubjective model of consciousness in *What Maisie Knew*, arguing that consciousness is "not in persons; it is rather between them" (77).

<sup>15</sup>Mitchell was the first to articulate the argument that Maisie essentially becomes an image of James: "What Maisie knows is what we know, which is what the narrator knows, which is what James knows"



(168). This argument has tended to attract the attention of theoretically oriented critics skeptical about James's putative aestheticism and elitism, who respond to it by finding in Maisie precisely the birthplace of James's aesthetic complicity with power (see Eckstein and Teahan for examples).

#### WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

- The Ambassadors*. Ed. S. P. Rosenbaum. New York: Norton, 1994. Print.  
 AN—*Art of the Novel*. New York: Scribner's, 1934. Print.  
*The Awkward Age*. Ed. Ronald Blythe. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.  
 WMK—*What Maisie Knew*. Ed. Paul Theroux. London: Penguin, 1985. Print.

#### OTHER WORKS CITED

- Cameron, Sharon. *Thinking in Henry James*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991. Print.  
 Carpenter, William B. *Principles of Mental Physiology*. New York: Appleton, 1890. Print.  
 Caruth, Cathy. "An Interview with Jean Laplanche." *Postmodern Culture* 11.2 (2001): n. pag. *Project Muse*. Web. 15 May 2013.  
 Cobbe, Francis Power. *Darwinism in Morals*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1872. Print.  
 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Shakespearean Criticism*. Ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor. Vol. 1. London: Constable, 1930. Print.  
 Eckstein, Barbara. "Unsquaring the Squared Route of *What Maisie Knew*." *Henry James Review* 9 (1988): 177–87. Print.  
 Edel, Leon. *Henry James: A Life*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985. Print.  
 Ender, Evelyne. *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995. Print.  
 Felman, Shoshana. "Turning the Screw of Interpretation." *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 94–207. Print.  
 Fletcher, John, and Peter Osborne. "The Other Within: Rethinking Psychoanalysis: An Interview with Jean Laplanche." *Radical Philosophy* 102 (2000): 31–41. Web. 15 May 2013.  
 Hadley, Tessa. *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.  
 Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977. Print.  
 Laplanche, Jean. *Essays on Otherness*. Ed. John Fletcher. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.  
 ———. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.  
 ———. *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. Trans. David Macey. London: Blackwell, 1989. Print.  
 Lear, Jonathan. *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.  
 Logan, Peter Melville. *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print.  
 Lustig, T. J. *Henry James and the Ghostly*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.  
 Matus, Jill. *Shock, Memory, and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.  
 Miller, Jonathan. "Going Unconscious." *Hidden Histories of Science*. Ed. Robert B. Silvers. New York: New York Review of Books, 1995. 1–36. Print.  
 Mitchell, Juliet. "*What Maisie Knew*: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl." *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*. Ed. John Goode. London: Methuen, 1972. 168–89. Print.  
 Przybylowicz, Donna. *Desire and Repression: The Dialectic of Self and Other in the Late Works of Henry James*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1986. Print.  
 Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Methuen, 1983. Print.  
 Rivkin, Julie. *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James's Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. Print.  
 ———. "The Genius of the Unconscious: Psychoanalytic Criticism." *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*. Ed. Peter Rawlings. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. 59–79. Print.  
 Rowe, John Carlos. *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984. Print.  
 Ryan, Vanessa Lyndal. *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012. Print.  
 Santner, Eric L. *The Psychotheology of Everyday Life*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001. Print.  
 Shuttleworth, Sally, and Jenny Bourne Taylor, eds. *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830–1890*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998. Print.  
 Taylor, Jenny Bourne. "Obscure Recesses: Locating the Victorian Unconscious." *Writing and Victorianism*. Ed. J. B. Bullen. London: Longman, 1997. 137–79. Print.  
 Teahan, Sheila. *The Rhetorical Logic of Henry James*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995. Print.  
 Wellek, René. "Henry James's Literary Theory and Criticism." *American Literature* 30 (1958): 292–321. Print.  
 Wilson, Harris W. "What Did Maisie Know?" *College English* 17.5 (1956): 279–82. Print.