

Henry James and 'What Maisie Knew' : The Vital Importance of Being Ignorant

Rawlings, Peter
Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University

<https://doi.org/10.15017/6501>

出版情報 : 言語文化論究. 8, pp.139-172, 1997-03-01. 九州大学言語文化部
バージョン :
権利関係 :



Henry James and 'What Maisie Knew': The Vital Importance of Being Ignorant

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.¹

Untruth is a condition of life.²

"I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe."

"But in imagining an erroneous order you still found something . . .".³

(i) Preliminaries: Henry James and the Discourse of Organicism

Philip C. Ritterbush considers James's 'The Art of Fiction' an example of the 'more generalized concept of the organic which assumed such importance in the literary criticism of T.E. Hulme, I.A. Richards, and T.S. Eliot'. Its proclamation is of a 'unity of structure' recognizable in 'Aristotelian esthetics' and in the 'Renaissance'. What he misses, I see as informing not only the whole essay, but much of the rest of Henry James's theory and practice: a 'parallelism between biological growth and artistic creation and the awareness of principles of emergent order distinguishing organic from inorganic processes'.⁴ Unmistakably articulated in Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction' is an aesthetic of the novel in

1. Genesis 2 : 17.

2. F.W. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, edited by Oscar Levy, 18 vols., Vol. V, translated by Helen Zimmern (Edinburgh and London, 1909-1913), p.9; originally, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Leipzig, 1886).

3. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (London, 1983); originally, *Il nome della rosa* (1980).

4. Phillip C. Ritterbush, *The Art of Organic Forms* (Washington, 1968), p.86.

terms of 'life', of its being an 'organism', and the characteristics by which it can be recognized:

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.⁵

The life of a novel is a function of its organization. The parts are interdependent and cannot be arbitrarily removed; they make up, that is, a 'one and continuous' whole that is greater than the sum of its parts: 'in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts'. James's discourse is teleological and holistic. He is able to assert that novels have this kind of life by ascribing to them that causal nexus (of 'final causes') which defined, for Kant, the organism. Kant sees organisms as teleological entities: 'an organized product is one in which every part is reciprocally both end and means'.⁶ In complex ways, and for shifting reasons, James appropriated this organicist discourse partly in order to imbue his writing with an illusion of autonomous life and, in the process, to benefit from a naturalizing discourse.

The resurgence of vitalist thinking, in the later part of the nineteenth century, was an attempt to recuperate the category of 'life', to rescue it, that is, from the clutches of those biochemists and cell theorists who, increasingly,

5. 'The Art of Fiction' originally appeared in 1881 in *Longman's Magazine*, 4 (September, 1884), pp.502-521; my references are to its revised version in *Partial Portraits* (London and New York, 1888), pp.375-408 (pp.391-393).

6. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1928), II, p.24; originally, *Kritik der Urteilstkraft* (1790).

seemed to be establishing its material essence.⁷ Revived--in contemporary, more scientific, terms--was an opposition articulated by August Wilhelm von Schlegel:

Form is mechanical when, through external influence, it is communicated to any material merely as an accidental addition without reference to its quality; as, for example, when we give a particular shape to a soft mass that it may retain the same after its induration. Organical form, again, is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and acquires its determination along with the complete development of the germ⁸

This idealist and transcendentalist strain of organicist discourse initially opposed itself, in the main, to mechanistic views of the universe, and to what it saw as the corresponding reduction of artistic practice to stifling rules rigidly imposed. A work of art of this kind, unlike an organism, was not an end in itself; it was a means to other ends externally imposed. If literary texts, on the other hand, could be offered as defiantly organic, then there was hope for life itself.

Henry James walked a tightrope: it was tensed at one end by the vital, mysterious, and mystifying discourse of *Naturephilosophie* and Romantic biology, and at the other by the mechanical, analytical, and seemingly demystifying discourses of biochemistry and physiology. The imperatives of the

7. For a sense of this late nineteenth-century context, it is worth looking at Andrew Seth and R.B. Haldane, editors, *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* (London, 1883). Beyond that, there are two fine books on the context: François Jacob, *The Logic of Living Systems*, translated by Betty E. Spillmann (London, 1974); originally, *La logique du vivant; une histoire de l'hérédité* (Éditions Gallimard, 1971); and C.U.M. Smith, *The Problem of Life: An Essay in the Origins of Biological Thought* (London, 1976).

8. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, translated by John Black, 2 vols. (London, 1815), Vol. II, pp.94-95; originally, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (delivered in Vienna, 1808; published, 1809-1811), in *Sämliche Werke*, Vol. 6 (Leipzig, 1846). Coleridge took his more famous expression of the same idea from here: 'The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material;--as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form'; *Coleridge's Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets* (1811-1818), collected and edited by T. Ashe (London, 1883), p.229.

first were freedom, of the second, determinism. Unwittingly, however, he found himself colluding with vitalist biologists who, in developing an account of organic life, were very much in the business of occluding by ignorance the mechanical and determinative realities of an all-pervasive Darwinian climacteric.⁹ Even more problematically, what can be seen as James's transposition of a discourse originating in vitalist biology also entailed an inheritance of some of its intractable problems. As Claude Bernard had observed in connection with Bichat's paradigmatic definition of life--'Life consists in the sum of the functions by which death is resisted':

Bichat's definition contains two terms that are opposed to one another: *Life* and *Death*. It is in fact impossible to separate the two ideas, for what is living will eventually die, and what is dead, must have been alive . . . In a way he has made of life and death two entities, two principles continually engaged in a fight inside the organism.¹⁰

In part, this article is about some of the consequences of that fight, as James's *What Maisie Knew* became imbricated in a virulent form of what Jonathan Dollimore has termed an 'antagonistic binary'.¹¹

9. Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London, 1983) is still, despite its problems, the most impressive book on the Darwin-fiction intercalation. Also acutely relevant is J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

10. Marie François Xavier Bichat's definition is in his *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, translated by F. Gold (London, n.d.), p.21; originally, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (Paris, 1810). Claude Bernard, *Phenomena of Life Common to Animals and Vegetables*, Translated by R.P. and M.A. Cook (Dundee, 1974), p.13; originally, *Leçons sur les phénomènes de la vie communs aux animaux et végétaux* (Paris, 1878).

11. The phrase 'antagonistic binary' is used by Jonathan Dollimore in his 'The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault', *Textual Practice* (1990), pp.179-196.

(ii) Kant, Ignorance, and Organicism

Kant seemed anxious to arrest what he posited as the infinite potential of the imagination. As Rousseau had observed: 'the world of reality has its bounds, the world of imagination is boundless; as we cannot enlarge the one, let us restrict the other'.¹² For Kant, 'taste, like judgement in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius'; and

it severely clips its wings, and makes it orderly or polished; but at the same time it gives it guidance, directing and controlling its flight, so that it may preserve its character of finality.

Similarly:

in lawless freedom imagination, with all its wealth, produces nothing but nonsense; the power of judgement, on the other hand, is the faculty that makes it consonant to understanding.¹³

The barely concealed fear is of the transgressive potential of an imagination that can become involved in the process of remaking and remodelling the world of experience and that must, therefore, be constrained by laws that appear as given, unchangeable, and natural. Imagination is a 'powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature'. 'Representations of the imagination', aesthetic ideas, 'strain after something lying out beyond experience'. Where, then, such a faculty is used to 'remodel experience', it follows 'no doubt . . . principles which have a higher seat in reason' (I, p.176). The production of fine art depends, therefore, on the regulating

12. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile* (1762), translated by Barbara Foxley, Everyman Edition (1911), reprinted (London and New York, 1969), p.45.

13. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1928), I, p.183; originally, *Kritik der Urteilstkraft* (1790); subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

of aesthetic ideas by the *a priori* principles of the understanding; and such production is only possible where there is genius:

in all free arts something of a compulsory character is still required, or as it is called, a *mechanism*, without which the *soul*, which in art must be *free*, and which alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless and evanescent (I, p.164).¹⁴

Kant's concern is with more than 'remaking' and 'remodelling'. In considering whether the 'nexus of natural finality *proves* the existence of a special kind of causality for nature', he suggests the alternative possibility that:

this nexus, considered in its true nature and on objective principles, is, on the contrary, identical with the mechanism of nature, or rests on one and the same ground, though in the case of many natural products this ground often lies too deeply buried for our investigation (II, p.41).

What is 'as if' and subjectively the case in the phenomenal world of appearances and fictions is distinct from what 'is'. The concept of a 'physical end' itself, the teleological entity of the organism, 'is only thinkable by the aid of reason':

we have no insight into its objective reality we do not know whether it is a mere logical fiction and an objectively empty conception (*conceptus ratiocinans*), or whether it is a rational conception, supplying a basis of knowledge and substantiated by reason (*conceptus ratiocinatus*) (II, pp.48-49).

It is possible to argue that there is an acknowledgement here of a collusion between the restricting of knowledge to the phenomenal world, predicated as it might be on 'logical fictions', and organicist constructions of the category of life.

By definition, organicist accounts of life specified causal connections of a reciprocal kind between the parts and the whole of the organism. Buffon had written, in 1749, that we 'are naturally led to believe that there is a kind of order

14. Original emphases.

and uniformity throughout nature' and that nature operates on the same principles as 'ourselves'; this 'manner of thinking causes us to invent an infinity of false connections between the things nature produces'. But given that for Buffon, as for Kant, 'things in themselves, have no existence for us', we only have a sense of them in terms of 'their relations to each other and their properties', all connection might be mis-connection, and the boundary between fiction, the false, and appearances becomes highly tenuous.¹⁵

Kant's concept of appearances implies an inaccessible realm of the objective whose secrets--'too deeply buried for our investigations'--it constructs by keeping. Better, perhaps, that inaccessibility than a full encounter with the determining realities. Better still, a mystifying commitment to the possibility of a common derivation for the 'heterogeneous principles' of the mechanistic and the organic, than a transcendent reconciliation of the two:

the principle common to the mechanical derivation, on the one hand, and the teleological, on the other, is the *supersensible* But of this we are unable from a theoretical point of view to form the slightest positive determinate concept.

This principle is common to the phenomenal and transphenomenal: it presupposes a 'supersensible ground' and, therefore, assures 'the possibility of both being reconciled' (II, pp.71; 70). M. H. Abrams, in arguing that 'Kant formulates the view of a natural organism, as immanently but unconsciously teleological' implies an essentialism alien to Kant's position. It runs counter to

15. Buffon, Comte de (G. L. Leclerc), *Premier Discours: De la manière d'étudier et de traiter l'Histoire naturelle*, in *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du cabinet du roi*, de L'imprimerie Royale, à Paris (1749-1767), Vol. I (1749); translated by John Lyon, in 'The "Initial Discourse" to Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*: the First Complete English Translation', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 9 (1976), pp.133-181.

his denial of our access to things-in-themselves and his positing of the teleological principle as regulative rather than constitutive, a principle formulated on the analogy between ourselves, as ends, and the natural world.¹⁶

From the outset, in fact, the tangled skeins of organicist discourse had traded in secrets, the unknowable, depth, and the concealed:

When I speak of objects in time and space, it is not of things in themselves, of which I know nothing, but of things in appearances, i.e. of experience, as a particular way of cognizing objects which is only affordable to man.¹⁷

The 'idea' of the 'thing-in-itself' has

certainly to be introduced on the basis of the possibility of . . . objects of experience, although it cannot itself be elevated or extended into a cognition (*The Critique of Judgement*, I, p.13).

In such a discourse:

Animal species differ at their peripheries, and resemble each other at their centres; they are connected by the inaccessible, and separated by the apparent.¹⁸

Lewes consigned life to the 'unknowable', its being 'one of the many mysteries surrounding us' that 'cannot be unveiled'.¹⁹ Bichat was keen to restrict the reach of his analysis and, significantly, he expressed such restrictions in terms of veils, reading, and the forbidden:

16. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London and New York, 1953), p.208.

17. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic that will be Able to Come Forward as Science*, translated by Paul Carus (Chicago, 1902), revised by James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, 1972); originally, *Prolegomena* (1783).

18. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, 1970), p.267; originally, *Le Mots et les choses* (Éditions Gallimard, 1966).

19. George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1869), II, pp.422-423.

So narrow indeed are the limits of human understanding, that the knowledge of first causes has almost been interdicted. The veil, which covers them, envelopes with its innumerable folds whoever attempts to read it.²⁰

His ultimate exploration was of 'the limits of every organized part', the nature of their 'textures' remaining 'unknown'.²¹ For Berzelius, 'the chain of experience must *always* end in something inconceivable' but, 'unfortunately, the *inconceivable something* acts the principal part'. Such a 'something' is prescinded first by being 'inconceivable' and again because 'deeply hidden from our view'. Claude Bernard acknowledged his boundaries, observing that the 'manifestations of life cannot be wholly elucidated by the physico-chemical phenomena known in inorganic nature'. Even more strikingly, he approached the entity of life itself as a discursive formation:

the words life, death, health, disease, have no objective reality. When a physiologist calls in vital force or life, he does not see it; he merely pronounces a word.²²

Vital 'causes' were simply supposed by Bichat--'let us suppose causes, and attach ourselves to their general result'--and regarded, by Bernard, as 'just a kind of medical superstition'.²³ Both positions come close to that of seeing life as some kind of necessary fiction. An account of life other than in mechanical, or

20. Marie François Xavier Bichat, *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, translated by F. Gold (London, n.d.), p.79; originally, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (Paris, 1810).

21. Marie François Xavier Bichat, *General Anatomy, Applied to Physiology and to the Practice of Medicine*, translated from the last French edition by Constant Coffyn, 2 vols. (London, 1824), I, p.lv; originally, *Anatomie générale, appliquée à la physiologie et à la médecine* (Paris, 1810).

22. Claude Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, translated by Henry Copley Greene (New York, 1949), pp.69, 71; originally, *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (Paris, 1865).

23. *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, p.79; *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p.68.

materialist, terms

is a fiction; but we do not on that account reject it. Fictions are potent . . . This fiction *has* been tested, and has proved a failure. Nevertheless it has left behind it a convenient phrase.²⁴

Kant dogmatically asserts--proscribing, in the process, any attempt to gain knowledge of this kind--that it is

quite certain that we can never get a sufficient knowledge of organized beings and their inner possibility, much less get an explanation of them, by looking merely to mechanical principles of nature.

This pursuit is 'absurd'; and 'such insight we must absolutely deny to mankind' (*The Critique of Judgement*, II, p.54). The resonance here is of that primal injunction concerning the 'tree of knowledge' and death. Examined too deeply, there is an equivalence between 'life' and 'death', in terms of essential mechanism, which organicist discourse works to defer and conceal. Unsurprisingly, Kant quotes with approval an inscription he encountered on the Temple of Isis: 'I am all that is, and that was, and shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face' (*The Critique of Judgement*, I, p.179n).

Restricting the imagination, denying access to knowledge, and arguing for the ultimate imponderability of life imply, respectively, absolute realms beyond, the possibility of complete knowledge, and powerful secrets. The intersection is between the present, contingent, and apparent, and the absent, incontinent, and real. Life is possible, bearable, significant, and even interesting, not for what it is, but for what it is not. This dualism informs what might be termed the idealist, or transcendentalist, organicism of Kant and Coleridge and not only the vitalism

24. George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, First Series, 2 vols. (London, 1874-1875), I, p.46.

of Bichat and Berzelius but also, more surprisingly, the physiology and histology of Claude Bernard. For Kant, there is what should and cannot be known; Bernard believed that the morphogenesis of an organism was irretrievable; and Bichat's analysis ended at the threshold of life.

(iii) '*What Maisie Knew*' and Chaotic Folkestone

It is within this context that I want to consider why it is that Maisie's enquiry at Folkestone about the Captain, and her mother's dismissing him as 'the biggest cad in London!', is treated in such an apocalyptic way by the narrator:

there rose in her a fear, a pain, a vision ominous, precocious, of what it might mean for her mother's fate to have forfeited such a loyalty as that. There was literally an instant in which Maisie fully saw--saw madness and desolation, saw ruin and darkness and death. "I've thought of him often since, and I hoped it was with him--with him-----" Here, in her emotion, it failed her, the breath of her filial hope.²⁵

What Maisie Knew is not some kind of *bildungsroman*, it here appears, culminating in 'spots of time'

That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue²⁶

Imposed upon Maisie by a narrator who also silences her is a grammar of the sublime that collapses into incoherence.

Maisie first encounters the Captain in a Kensington Gardens likened to the

25. Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London, 1897), Ch.21, p.187; subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

26. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1805), (London, 1850), pp.325-326.

‘Forest of Arden’; and there, as part of a romance in which Sir Claude adopts for Maisie and himself the roles of the ‘banished duke’ and the ‘artless country wench’ (Ch.15, p.115), she struggles to extract the Captain’s protestations of ‘loyalty’: “Of *course* I love her, damn it, you know!” (Ch.16, p.128). There is the usual irony of Maisie’s taking things straight, but any comedy is muted by her desperate persistence.

Some of the impact of the Folkestone passage is achieved by a shift to a tragic tone which resonates against that of the Kensington Gardens idyll. The movement from Maisie’s seeing the Captain through the ‘thick mist’ (Ch.16, p.127) of her tears to her ‘fully’ seeing at Folkestone is also a movement from the world of *As You Like It* to one that is consanguineous with that of *King Lear*.²⁷

What Maisie encounters here is the foundering of a construction. Hers is the momentary confusion of a failure to make valid connections in Kensington Gardens; a failure which, in a quixotic way, exposes the fictive and uncovers the literal, and threatens her with the atomization of that fiction of which she is a product. But there is enough of the literary about that ‘literally’ to suggest that construction has as much to do with what is conventionally taken as being

27. ‘That way madness lies’, of course, is a line spoken by King Lear when he finds himself, Maisie-like, detached and disconnected from his family; William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (The Folio Text), in *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Compact Edition (Oxford, 1988), III iv 21, p.960. Appropriately, John Locke defined madness in terms of misconnection and implied, in the process, collapsing divisions between the false and the true, ‘Fancies’ and ‘Realities’: ‘*mad Men . . . having joined together some Ideas very wrongly, they mistake them for Truths . . . For by the violence of their Imaginations, having taken their Fancies for Realities, they make right deductions from them*’; ‘thus’, in a way relevant to Lear, ‘you shall find a distracted Man fancying himself a King’; *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1690), Book II, Ch.11, p.71. Kensington Gardens, for Maisie, is akin to the ‘scene’ of Henry James’s letter to Elizabeth Robins (25 June 1891): ‘Don’t play *any* play for the sake of one “great scene”’; that way madness lies, and destruction, and death’; in Elizabeth Robins, *Theatre and Friendship: Some Henry James Letters* (London, 1932), p.39.

'reality' as it has with fiction. If Maisie, here, is an artist-manqué exploring the means by which a coherent appearance of an essentially chaotic and meaningless reality is synthesized, she is also a character in fiction, herself constructed. The reflexive mode, in James's fiction, can be seen as an imitation of that principle of reciprocity that Kant identified as being central to any definition of the organism.²⁸ In *What Maisie Knew*, that mode is all-pervasive:

The child had been in thousands of stories--all Mrs. Wix's and her own, to say nothing of the richest romances of French Elise--but she has never been in such a story as this . . . the Arabian Nights had quite closed around her (Ch.18, p.146).

The fiction of this novel is more than an homologue of the principles on which the world of experience is organized, an organization having much in common with fabricating, fictionalizing, and constructing in general: fiction and appearances (commonly, 'reality') are both transposable and consubstantial.

There is an extent to which *What Maisie Knew*, with the carnal resonances of that 'knew', is an account of Maisie's developing sexual awareness; this investing the question of connection, for her, with palpable menace. But sexuality as such [*sic*], or a growth towards its apprehension, is trivial in the novel as distinct from its metaphorical reach.²⁹ A web of affinities is established between the process of sexual connection, and deferred penetration, and the construction of a manifold of appearances implying a reality that must, nevertheless, be kept in perpetual abeyance if its fiction is to be preserved. With the Captain and

28. In an organism, 'ends . . . involve regressive as well as progressive dependency'; *The Critique of Judgement*, II, p.20.

29. Relevant are George Eliot's wily observations on metaphor: 'for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them'; *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, 1965), Bk. I, Ch. 10, p.111.

perhaps, much more contentiously, Sir Claude, the genre of romance enshrouds predatory sexuality. Anxieties about destructive penetration, discovery, revelation, knowledge, and death can be appropriately located on the site of the body; a central point of organicist aesthetics, of course, being that this site can be regarded as an analogue of any text that claims vitality. Ultimate connections (as distinct from the endless process of connecting and mis-connecting), penetration, the sexual act, revelation, and death, are part of a lexical set which--in that long-standing mythology serving powerfully to restrict knowledge, to keep secrets and preserve a mechanism of secrecy--must be held off.³⁰ The issue arises starkly as Potiphar's wife, in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, rapes Joseph, discursively. 'That she might slip upon his secret and "bring him to a fall"' she

tore with hot hands at the pretended fabric of their converse--his fig-leaf, as it were--to uncover the naked truth of the thou and I. She could not know what frightful associations were bound up in Joseph's mind with the idea of uncovering . . . going back to the beginning and place where nakedness and knowledge had sharply confronted each other, with the resulting distinction between good and evil.³¹

The life of a text, indeed the concept of life itself, depends on its capacity to resist destructive analysis, and on the extent to which it can, like the organism, foster an illusion of inaccessible depths within which are buried those vital principles, or an entelechy, that could account for the complexities and incoherencies of the surface. Where such illusions are dispelled, the apparent

30. The most penetrating (so to speak) book on the metaphor-'as if'-appearance-reality matrix remains H. Valhinger's *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, translated by C.K. Ogden (London and New York, 1924); originally, *Die Philosophie des als-ob* (1911).

31. Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers* (1933-1943), translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp.743-744; originally, *Joseph Und Seine Brüder* (1943).

access is to its actual determinations, to the essentially mechanical, as distinct from the fictively organic. As Macherey argues, any talk of 'depth' in a text

is the product of a doubling which is ideologically fertile but theoretically sterile, since it places the work *in perspective* but tells us nothing of its determinations We must examine the work in its real complexity rather than in its mythical depth.³²

At the centre of *What Maisie Knew*, then, is the arcanum of connection; and its surfacing so starkly at Folkestone is partly responsible for the rhetorical and allusive energy of that scene. In Macherey's terms, it is possible to explore Maisie's discovery, or her uncovering, as a 'fissure', a moment where the text has to receive its own theory.³³ Such an exploration requires, in part, a retrieval of the concept of 'chaos'.

(iv) *Glossing over Chaotic Intervals: Excavating the Archive*

'Philosophy', said Adam Smith, 'is the science of the connecting principles of nature'. Wonder, he contended, is a condition brought about by an 'unusual succession of things' which results in 'disjointed' objects with 'a gap or interval betwixt them'. When there is a 'clear discovery of a connecting chain', the difficulties 'vanish', along with the sensation of having 'been admitted behind the

32. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, translated from the French by Geoffrey Wall (London, 1978), p.99; originally, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris, 1966). There is a recognition, in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1866), of the way in which mythologies of depth function. Nietzsche's sceptical hermit would doubt whether a philosopher 'can have "ultimate and actual" opinions at all; whether behind every cave . . . there is not, and must necessarily be, a still deeper cave: an ampler, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abyss, behind every bottom, beneath every "foundation"'; *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, edited by Oscar Levy, 18 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1909), Vol. V, p.257.

33. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Chs.14-18.

scenes'. Interpretations, constructions, or fictions, counteract penetrations and analysis; such discursive practices are both prophylactics and therapies for chaos:

Nature, after the largest experience that common observation can acquire, seems to abound with events which appear solitary and incoherent with all that go before them, which therefore disturb the easy movement of the imagination Philosophy, by representing the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects, endeavours to introduce order into this chaos of jarring and discordant appearances.³⁴

James, in a statement proleptic of 'The Figure in the Carpet' (1896) and its strategies, agreed about the importance of connections: 'it may be said that the study of connections is the recognised function of intelligent criticism'.³⁵

Chapter IX, 'The Stream of Thought', in William James's *The Principles of Psychology*, raises issues that are immediately relevant.³⁶ Art, where the aesthetic is one of illusion, can collude with our resting secure in a world of appearances, like Maisie on the 'stream' of her thought about the Captain and her mother. William James posits that alternative which, for 'literally an instant', Maisie sees:

We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! (I, p.288)

34. Adam Smith, 'The Principles which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy' (c.1750), in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, by Adam Smith, edited by Joseph Black and James Hutton (London, 1795), pp.3-93 (pp.16, 20).

35. 'Pierre Loti' (1888), in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (London and New York, 1893), pp.159-194 (p.160).

36. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (Boston, Mass., 1890); subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

'Knowledge *about* a thing is knowledge of its relations'. But

no possible number of entities (call them as you like, whether forces, material particles, or mental elements) can sum *themselves* together. Each remains, in the sum, what it always was; and the sum itself exists only *for a bystander* who happens to overlook the units and apprehend the sum as such . . . (I, p.158).³⁷

What Maisie Knew, as its title suggests, is intensely concerned with questions of knowledge; and relevant to its whole structure is the idea that what is generally taken for knowledge is the product of perceived relations. For William James, a world of atomistic individualism and potentially disabling relativism is avoided by a kind of inter-subjectivity, the fabricating of a consensus: 'the human race as a whole largely agrees as to what it shall notice and name, and what not' (I, p.289). But this agreement is dependent on a high degree of passivity (resembling Smith's 'passing along . . . disjointed objects') which is carried here at the levels of lexis and rhetoric.³⁸ The possibility of exercising 'our reasoning' to penetrate through appearances to a chaotic reality is only casually invoked by that 'if we like', a phrase made ludicrous by its environment of cosmic metaphors. And 'all the while the world', whose extraction we share with 'our ancestors', never really gives way to what is regarded, merely at a scientific level, as the actual. That potentially rational 'we' is rendered ephemeral by an emphatic, manipulatively

37. This Chapter first appeared under the title 'On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology', *Mind*, 9 (1884), pp.1-26; it was substantially revised for the book. The extent to which Henry James read *The Principles of Psychology* is ultimately imponderable; but William himself recommended the book to Henry, particularly 'the earlier pp. of the Chapter on Consciousness of Self'; Letter dated 28 September 1890, The James Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University: bMS Am 1092.9 2657. Little of the vast literature on the relation between the thought of William and Henry impinges on my argument; much of it is surveyed in what is still the *locus classicus* on this issue: Richard Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought: A Study in the Relationship between the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina and London, 1974).

38. *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, p.16.

inclusive 'we' which displaces it and sits comfortably amidst common-sense appearances. There is a significant ambiguity in that 'overlook': it implies aggregation based on selection, but also that knowledge depends on not seeing fully, as Maisie did at Folkestone, on not attending too much to those parts that can obstruct a sense of the whole. Ultimately, it is difficult to conceive of a more passive label than 'bystander'.

The aesthetic implications of what William James has to say here can be established by looking briefly at an early incident in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.³⁹ A puppet-show is the young Wilhelm's initiation into the theatrical world. His 'astonishment and surprise' soon give way to curiosity:

How it was all contrived was my great object to discover. I was sensible from the beginning, that the puppets did not themselves speak. I suspected, moreover, that they did not move of their own accord; but how was all so well contrived, and how did they appear to speak and move spontaneously?

Wilhelm enjoys appearances; but he is anxious to explore their construction:

These difficulties distressed me the more, as I wished, at the same time, to form one of the enchanted and the enchanters, to take a secret part in the play, and as a spectator to enjoy the pleasures of the illusion.⁴⁰

At the end of the performance, this Puck-like characteristic leads Wilhelm into

39. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), translated by R. Dillon Boylan (London, 1875), pp.10-11. James criticized Schérer for his 'strange dulness of vision when he declares that he can see nothing but dreariness in "Wilhelm Meister", in 'Schérer's Literary Studies', *Nation*, 22 (1876), p.233. In his review of Thomas Carlyle's translation (Boston, 1865), James drew attention to a 'profound . . . meaning enveloped in' a 'common form'; *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, *North American Review*, 101 (1865), pp.281-285 (pp.281-282).

40. Unlike James, on the evidence of his 'The Théâtre Français' (1877): 'one may be very fond of the stage and yet care little for the green-room . . . They might pass on the torch as they would behind the scenes; so long as during my time they did not let it drop I made up my mind to be satisfied'; *French Poets and Novelists* (London, 1878), pp.403-439 (p.415).

the room where the puppets are being packed away.⁴¹ And 'from this time forth' Harlequin possesses 'no charm' for him. He tries to connect the fact that the 'Lieutenant', the organizer, is now dismantling the show with his earlier seeing him 'busy in the interior' of the stage, but fails:

Upon acquiring a little knowledge, I felt as if I had learnt nothing, and I was right, for I could not understand the connection of the parts, and upon that in truth everything depends.

Like Maisie, at Folkestone, Wilhelm Meister has seen too much. He is perceptive enough, too perceptive and analytically destructive, to penetrate beyond the appearance to those parts of which it is a whole, when apprehended as such; but he is then no longer able to 'overlook' those parts. The illusion is dispelled; the whole is atomized into its parts. Over a hundred years later, Wilhelm could have pondered the artist-narrator's comment in James's 'The Real Thing':

I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they *were* or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question.⁴²

William James's 'bystander' has affinities with Coleridge's man of the 'primary IMAGINATION'; whereas Maisie and Wilhelm have more to do with the 'secondary' imagination which

dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as*

41. 'What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor--/An actor, too, perhaps, if I see cause'; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III I 73-74; in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Compact Edition (Oxford, 1988), p.320.

42. 'The Real Thing' (1892), in *The Real Thing and Other Tales* (New York and London, 1893), pp.1-41 (p.12).

objects) are essentially fixed and dead.⁴³

Re-creation, it is implied, is the secondary imagination's highest achievement. But that 'recreate' is not only deferred by 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates', but undercut by the alliterative energy of the triple negatives and a swiftly following conjunctive alternative affirming impossibility and struggle. The situation of 'yet still' is syntactically awkward and does little to dislodge a sense of the 'impossible' elevated and made final partly by that 'rendered'. Recreation is suspended by a vigorous treatment of the failure to achieve it; and the reader, by that 'recreate' and the struggling of its absence, is twice removed from the fact that 'all objects . . . are essentially fixed and dead'. Deferred by an insubstantial 'recreate', itself held off by a barrier of impossibility and interminable 'struggles to idealize and to unify', is a discovery analogous to that made by Wilhelm Meister: a penetration through appearances to the essential is, potentially, an irreversible apprehension of that 'solving emptiness that lies just under all we do'.⁴⁴ Life is a matter of appearances; and correspondingly, art, the art of the puppet-show at least, requires inviolate illusion. Fiction and the chimera of life, itself an affair where 'truths' can be 'tales' and 'half-tales be truths', are potent cohabiters.⁴⁵ Coleridge's language, in this passage, works against an attempt to dwarf the valleys of empiricism with the peaks of the imagination. Indeed, that 'essentially', of 'objects' being 'fixed and dead', places a fatal burden on the

43. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, 2 vols (London, 1817), I, pp.295-296.

44. Philip Larkin, 'Ambulances', in *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite (London, 1988), pp.132-133.

45. *Antony and Cleopatra*, II ii 140-141; in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, The Compact Edition (Oxford, 1988), p.1010.

'secondary imagination', not least by drawing attention to the illusory nature of any re-creative alternative. Inherent in this discourse is that about which it struggles to be silent.

Appendix C of Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual* appears to assert the vital powers of the imagination more positively.⁴⁶ Explored, in part, is the polarity of the 'discursive understanding' (p.xi) and the 'IMAGINATION' (p.xii), and its aesthetic consequences in terms of the 'mechanic' and the 'vital' (p.xxvii): 'products of destruction, cadavera rerum' are the former, in which 'a few brilliant inventions' are 'purchased' at the expense of that 'communion with life and the spirit of nature' associated with the latter (p.xvii). Later, Coleridge reverts to the more recognizably Kantian categories of 'Understanding' and 'Reason'; but he sees these, in a veil of Biblical rhetoric and mystical language, as 'elements . . . of Religion' (p.xxvii).

A characteristic of 'Understanding' is 'Clearness', rather than the 'depth' of 'imagination', and such understanding leads to a knowledge merely of 'superficies without substance', whereas the

completing power which unites clearness with depth, the plenitude of the sense with the comprehensibility of the understanding, is the IMAGINATION, impregnated with which the understanding itself becomes intuitive, and a living power (p.xii).

Coleridge, by contrast with his view of many later eighteenth-century thinkers, claims not only knowledge as an object of the imagination, but transcendent

46. *The Statesman's Manual or The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society, with an Appendix, containing Comments and Essays Connected with the Study of the Inspired Writings* (London, 1816), pp.v-xxx; references will be given parenthetically in the text.

knowledge.

But even here, the faculty of the imagination is suspended and circumscribed by empirical terms such as 'understanding' and 'power'.⁴⁷ And in attempting to reconcile 'vital' and 'mechanic' elements, to tackle the issue of how a 'living' philosophy can commune with an essentially 'dead nature', Coleridge's is a transcendental resort:

the two component counterpowers actually inter-penetrate each other, and generate s higher third, including both the former, *ita tamen ut sit alia et major* (p.xxvii).⁴⁸

We are back with *The Critique of Judgement* and Kant's fiction of the 'supersensible' (II, p.70).

In Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode', that which for an 'instant . . . Maisie fully saw' is but partially evoked as 'Reality's dark dream!'. The poem affirms the possibility of a 'shaping spirit of Imagination' by voicing its suspension, and so leaves the poet in an 'inanimate cold world' where 'we receive but what we give' and

. . . may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.⁴⁹

There are similarities between the poet's situation--'void, dark, and drear'--and Locke's man of 'Understanding' if deprived of those 'passages' of 'Sensation',

47. As emanating from John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1690).

48. Two books on James explore aspects of this 'triad' and his work: Daniel Mark Fogel, *Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination* (Baton Rouge and London, 1981), and J.A. Ward, *The Search for Form: Studies in the Structure of James's Fiction* (North Carolina, 1967).

49. 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), in *The Poetical Works of S.T. Coleridge*, 3 vols. (London, 1834), Vol. I, pp.235-240.

'the Windows by which light is let into' an otherwise '*dark Room*'.⁵⁰ Locke can still assert a confidence in, and need for, the access of man to an 'objective' reality:

The best way to come to Truth, being to examine Things as really they are, and not to conclude they are as we fancy of our selves, or have been taught to imagine by others.⁵¹

But that opposition between 'Truth' and 'imagine' hints at the dependence of art on the concealment of 'things as really they are', and why it is that, effectively, Maisie's uncovering of her own fiction at Folkestone, and hence her fictive nature, releases such chaotic energy.

When Locke considers what he terms the 'secondary Perception'--adumbrating, of course, Coleridge's secondary imagination--his 'viewing again the *Ideas*, that are lodg'd in the *Memory*', together with '*the Mind is oftentimes more than barely passive*' (II, Ch.10, p.66), are close to aspects of 'Dejection: An Ode':

The Mind very often sets it self on work in search of some hidden *Idea*, and turns, as it were, the Eye of the Soul upon it; though sometimes too they start up in our Minds of their own accord, and offer themselves to the Understanding; and very often are roused and tumbled out of their dark Cells, into open Day-light, by some turbulent and tempestuous Passion (II, Ch.10, p.66).

Aesthetically, Locke is content with this kind of limitation. He implies that in such a realm it is inappropriate for the '*Judgement*' to separate, in the interests of 'Truth', those '*Ideas*' assembled by '*Wit*'. 'Beauty appears at first sight':

50. I am indebted to S.H. Clark, 'Blake's Milton and the Response to Locke in the Poetry of Sensibility', unpublished PhD dissertation, Cambridge (1986), for alerting me to Locke's argument.

51. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1690), Book II, Ch.11, p.72; subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

The Mind, without looking any farther, rests satisfied with the pleasantness of the Picture, and the gayety of the Fancy: And it us a kind of affront to go about to examine it, by the severe Rules of Truth, and good Reason; whereby it appears, that it consists in something, that is not perfectly conformable to them (II, Ch.11, pp.68-69).

The appearances of art, then, depend on a limited, 'first sight' perception; and Wilhelm Meister's 'affront', at the puppet-show, is precisely that he wants to go further. With Maisie, narratorial, even authorial, 'judgement' interposes to separate her Kensington Gardens connection at Folkestone. When constructions fail, and the fictive nature of what is taken for reality is exposed, then there are those glimpses of the chaos that such fictions conceal. Connections, misconnections, and fictions of the surface are unimportant if they are perceived as functions of a vital depth; but if such surfaces are revealed as being, by analytical penetration, synthetic, then the potential apprehension is of a complex surface entirely commensurate with reality.

David Hume argued, at one level, that there is a limit to what 'mechanical philosophy' can achieve, thus implying a realm of knowledge beyond; consonant with this, his view of the universe as a mechanism is necessarily a veiled one:

While Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he showed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity, in which they ever did and ever will remain.⁵²

52. *The History of Great Britain*, 2 vols. (London, 1754/1757), Vol. II, p.452. Sartre is illuminating on the kind of imagery used by Hume, an illumination which *What Maisie Knew*—given its preoccupation with illicit sexual activity, Maisie's developing knowledge, and the limits of what can safely be known—intensifies: 'If we examine the comparisons ordinarily used to express the relation between the knower and the known, we see that many of them are represented as being a kind of *violation by sight* . . . We speak of snatching away her veils from nature . . . Every investigation implies the idea of nudity which one brings out into the open by clearing away the obstacles which cover it, just as Actaeon clears away the branches so that he can have a better view of Diana at her bath'; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on*

It is as if Hume had foreseen that any attempt to go beyond what Coleridge terms the 'superficies' of knowledge, writing close to Hume's 'superficial', would involve deconstructing the trap, that contained imaginative state, which generated Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode':

Nature has kept us at a great Distance from all her Secrets, and has afforded us only the Knowledge of a few superficial Qualities of Objects; while she conceals from us those Powers and Principles on which the Influence of these Objects entirely depends.⁵³

Cognate are William James's 'chaos', held off by consensus construction, the plight of a Maisie who, mis-connecting and without immediate alternatives, sees nothing but disintegration, Kant's denial of any access to vital principles and the 'thing in itself', and the way in which Hume secures himself empirically:

And while the Body is confin'd to one Planet, along which it creeps with Pain and Difficulty; the Thought can in an Instant transport us into the most distant Regions of the Universe; or even beyond the Universe, into the Unbounded Chaos, where Nature is supposed to lie in total Confusion But tho' our Thought seems to possess this unbounded Liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer Examination, that it is really confin'd within very narrow Limits, and that all this creative Power of the Mind amounts to no more than the compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the Materials afforded us by the Senses and Experience.⁵⁴

Hume allows himself to contemplate the 'unbounded chaos' of a natural universe, as distinct from a synthetic and artificial world of apparent reality, only to deny that 'thought' has such power. But the immensity of his 'supposition' fights

Phenomenological Ontology, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (London, 1969), p.578; originally, *L'Être at le Néant* (Gallimard, 1943).

53. David Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), second edition (London, 1750), p.59.

54. *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, pp.23-24.

against its negation; and that 'no more' has difficulty in subduing the 'creative power of the mind' to a 'faculty' counterfeiting reality in a world of sense-experience. Despite that 'creative', this is an elemental power capable of breaking down our compounded sense of reality, and Hume holds it off by stressing confinement and 'narrow limits'.

Coleridge bemoans his contained state in 'Dejection', but makes poetry out of speculations over a 'soul abroad' saved by confinement in the body, like Hume's 'thought', from encountering chaos. The production of this poem, of art, involves the arresting of process, the embodying, and rendering mortal, of imaginative conception. Locke's '*dark Room*' (II, Ch.11, p.72) can serve as an image of the empirical containment which, however organic the metaphors, is a condition of all art. This context helps further to illuminate the Jamesian preoccupation with images of containment. That 'house of fiction' with its 'windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected' can be allied with Locke's '*Mansion*' (I, Ch.2, p.2) and its '*dark Cells*' (II, Ch.10, p.66).⁵⁵

In terms of reality, appearances, like art, are constructed and illusory; but chaos can be deferred if the secret, involving fictions about the mysterious powers of nature and the imagination, is kept. Coleridge defined his organicism against the empiricism and mechanism of the eighteenth century, arguing that the ideal and the material could be fused in the realm of the imagination. But the disjunction implied between the discourses is artificial: both are constituted by

55. Henry James, 'Preface' to *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, edited by R.P. Blackmur (London and New York, 1947), p.46; *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pp.45, 63.

related and dependent fictions whose business is that of holding off chaotic atomism.

Coleridge managed, in *The Statesman's Manual*, to enfeeble chaos ('lightsome chaos') and any attempts to penetrate appearances--particularly those of science 'to arrange and classify and pore and pull to pieces'--by invoking one of the oldest fictions:

Man of understanding . . . do not far rather all things spread out before thee in glad confusion and heedless intermixture, even as a lightsome chaos on which the Spirit of God is moving? (pp.xvii-xviii)

To comprehend the world empirically is, at best, to construct a mechanism by establishing the

relations of unproductive particles to each other; so that in every instance the result is the exact sum of the component quantities, as in arithmetical additions.

There is nothing of Maisie's 'vision ominous' or Hume's 'unbounded chaos' here, given the fatuous and voyeuristic 'peep into Death to look for life, as monkies [*sic*] put their hands behind a looking-glass!'. Coleridge rests content, unlike the monkey and Wilhelm Meister, in not questioning illusion; creation is delegated to God as the world is viewed as a 'glass' reflecting the 'Divine Nature':

In all things and in each thing . . . the meanest object, it bears witness to a mystery of infinite solution. Thus 'beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, it is changed into the same image from glory to glory' (2 Cor. iii. 18) (p.xxviii).

Appearances, like the second monkey in a mirror, are illusory; but they, and art, are secure provided that no enquiring hands go behind the glass.

(v) *Towards a Conclusion*

Among Maisie's early realizations are that

everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock (Ch.5, p.28).

Her initial restriction is to a world where 'the actual was the absolute; the present alone was vivid' (Ch.2, p.10) and to a protective cocoon of thickened 'interpretations' (Ch.6, p.29). Maisie's serendipitous realization is that, as George Eliot's narrator has it in *Middlemarch*, 'signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable'.⁵⁶ After her 'fall' at Folkestone--her discovery not just of the truth, but of the extent to which she has inhabited a world of illusions--Maisie's recovery is of more than just an 'innocence' that is 'saturated with knowledge' and 'directed to diplomacy' (Ch.19, p.152). She achieves a kind of 'higher innocence' in which an attempt can be made to exercise something like that 'secondary imagination', that capacity for fictionalizing on which life depends. Maisie is presented as recovering from chaos by virtue of a constructive and synthesizing capacity to control her own fictions; it is a process which both validates the importance of fiction and implies that life is a fabrication. Maisie is reconstructed as possessing the appreciation of, and skills for, geometrical arrangement and containment which James regarded as essential to the novelist and reader.

When Mrs Wix first mentions her idea of a curious *ménage à trois*, comprising Sir Claude, Maisie, and herself, 'it hung before Maisie . . . like a

56. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, 1965), Bk. I, Ch. 3, p.47.

glittering picture', necessarily unrealizable and illusory, 'and she clasped her hands in ecstasy' (Ch.12, p.85). This 'arrangement' excludes Mrs. Beale; and Maisie's insistence on that exclusion at the close of the novel can be seen as a way of avoiding disabling disconnection and incoherence, of averting the collapse of an enabling fiction. No longer available to her is a passive 'overlooking' of the surface as a 'bystander'; but unlike Wilhelm Meister, she possesses the capacity to compound life-saving appearances from the elements of absence, deferral, and potential. Maisie is constructed as apprehending not only the full force of Mynheer Peeperkorn's (in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*) 'never', but of the symbiotic relation of life and narration: 'Let us not forget the condition of life as of narration: that we can never see the whole picture at once'.⁵⁷ Sir Claude remains in Boulogne with the non-pictorial Mrs. Beale; but he could return to England to complete the picture. In a related way, Carren O. Kaston has argued that 'although Maisie is unable to enforce the version of the plot she prefers--that is, life with Sir Claude--she can nevertheless place herself beyond melodrama by escaping from his household, *his* fiction'.⁵⁸ Penultimately--as distinct from ultimately, of course--Maisie finds herself obeying Leonato's illusion-sustaining imperative to 'fetter strong madness in a silken thread'.⁵⁹

Discourse, far from being a means of communication, is often an

57. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (Harmondsworth, 1960), p.63; originally, *Der Zauberberg* (1924).

58. Carren O. Kaston, 'Imagination and Desire in *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*', in *Henry James, Modern Critical Views* (New York, 1987), edited by Harold Bloom, pp.251-275 (pp.270, 275).

59. *Much Ado About Nothing*, V i 25, in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Compact Edition (Oxford, 1988), p.560.

instrument of necessary obstruction. As Nietzsche put it: 'every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a *lurking-place*, every word is also a *mask*'.⁶⁰ Discourses are not a function of reality, they constitute it. There might be an ordered world beyond discursive practices; but we inhabit one of apparent coherence which it synthesizes. Maisie's disabling encounter with chaos is, in Nietzsche's terms again, a dis-discovery of the truth, the 'horrible truth':

In this sense the Dionysian man may be said to resemble Hamlet: both have for once seen into the true nature of things, they have *perceived*, but they are loath to act Knowledge kills action, action requires the veil of illusion true knowledge, insight into the appalling truth, preponderates over all motives inciting to action In the consciousness of the truth he has perceived, man now sees everywhere only the awfulness or the absurdity of existence.⁶¹

Hamlet, until his end, rejects the 'inky cloak' of appearances in order to live essentially, at the level of 'is'; in denying to Gertrude that his is merely the form of grief, he asserts that 'it is; I know not seems'. At one level, Hamlet is thereby disabled and inactive; he is left contemplating whether 'to be or not to be'. It is the not being--consonant with the predication of life on fiction, renunciation, negation, deferral, denial, secrecy, and death--that constitutes life.⁶²

In George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*, which James reviewed as a 'metaphysical' and 'woefully sombre', the central character has sporadic

60. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1866), *Complete Works*, Vol. V, p.258.

61. *The Birth of Tragedy: or, Hellenism and Pessimism* (1872), *Complete Works*, Vol. 111, pp.61-62.

62. *Hamlet*, I ii 76-85, in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, The Compact Edition (Oxford, 1988), p.656.

moments when the 'appalling truth' is 'perceived'.⁶³ Eventually, this full seeing becomes permanent and extends to a vision of the character's own death. His 'superadded consciousness' commits him to a life in the hospice of knowledge, confined to the limbo of reality, and excluded from necessary fictions and life-saving appearances. Crucially, it is that omnipresent 'web' of connections that disintegrates under 'microscopic' (hence scientific, with shades of William James) observation:

But this superadded consciousness, wearying and annoying enough when it urged on me the trivial experience of indifferent people, became an intense pain and grief when it seemed to be opening to me the souls of those who were in close relation to me—when the rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds, which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as if thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap.⁶⁴

Life depends on not knowing and being ignorant is an active process..

Relevant here is the structure and project of Umberto Eco's novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*. In that novel, the feverish pursuit is of the significance of an apparently gnomonic scrap of mediaeval paper which begins as a laundry list, is gradually read into being a secret with immense ramifications, until the realization that it was written, in the first place, merely to tantalize. By the end, one character dies rather than reveal not the secret, but the secret that there is no secret:

63. James's review: '[George Eliot's Newly Published Tales]', *Nation*, 26 (1878), p.277.

64. 'The Lifted Veil' (1859), in *The Works of George Eliot*, Cabinet Edition, 20 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1878-1880), Vol. II, pp.275-341 (pp.294-295).

A plot, if there is to be one, must be a secret. A secret that, if we only knew it, would dispel our frustration, lead us to salvation; or else the knowing of it in itself would be the salvation. Does such a luminous secret exist? Yes, provided it is never known. Known, it will only disappoint us . . . the moment a secret is revealed, it seems little. There is only an empty secret. A secret that keeps slipping through your fingers. The secret of the orchid is that it signifies and affects the testicles. But the testicles signify a sign of the zodiac, which in turn signifies an angelic hierarchy, which then signifies a musical scale, and the scale signifies a relationship among the humours. And so on. Initiation is learning never to stop. The universe is peeled like an onion, and an onion is all peel. Let us imagine an infinite onion, which has its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere.⁶⁵

When James considered the 'organic whole' of Balzac's 'Comédie Humaine', what he resisted was that 'whole': if the 'organic' implies life, the 'whole' can be aligned with completion and death--with knowledge, that is--rather than with the 'indefinite' and 'unformulated' condition of life. He went on to argue that the 'farther limit' of such 'systems' and their

power of arrangement (so beautiful as it generally is) is the limit of the knowable. Consequently we often see in the visions and systems of Frenchmen what may be called a conventional infinite. The civilization of the nineteenth-century is of course not infinite, but to us of English speech, as we survey it, it appears so multitudinous, so complex, so far-spreading, so suggestive, so portentous--it has such misty edged and far reverberations--that the imagination, oppressed and overwhelmed, shrinks from any attempt to grasp it as a whole.⁶⁶

That 'conventional infinite' will do as a gloss on those fictions constituting a

65. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (Milan, 1988), translated by William Weaver (London, 1989), pp.620-621. Compare Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*: 'To possess a bicycle is to be able first to look at it, then to touch it. But touching it is revealed as being insufficient; what is necessary is to be able to get on the bicycle and take a ride. But this *gratuitous* ride is likewise insufficient; it would be necessary to use this bicycle to go on some errands. And this refers us to longer uses and more complete, to longer trips . . . I perceive that possession is an enterprise which death always renders unachieved . . . it is because it is impossible to realize the relation symbolized by appropriation . . . Destruction realizes appropriation perhaps more keenly than creation does (pp.592-593).

66. 'Honoré de Balzac' (1875), in *French Poets and Novelists*, pp.84-150 (p.103).

world of appearances dependent on that shrinking from grasping the 'whole'. James's 'survey' is akin to William James's 'overlook'. Both activities, unlike Maisie's full seeing and Wilhelm Meister's analytical penetration, merely licence a world of uncontested simulation, one of finite 'civilization' and the 'conventional'. In such a world, the empirical overwhelms and oppresses any imaginative attempt to do more than view from afar those 'misty edges' and 'far reverberations'.

William James, after reading *The American Scene*, rather missed the point when he wrote 'say it *out* for God's sake . . . and have done with it'.⁶⁷ Indirection and silence, culminating in its final sentence, is the very substance of *What Maisie Knew*: 'Mrs. Wix gave a sidelong look. She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew' (Ch.31, p.304). Mrs Wix's 'wonder' is a function of not knowing what it is that Maisie knows (or does not know). Where there is seeing in the novel, with the exception of that Folkestone fissure which is so revealing, it is far from direct: instead, there is 'her vision of this vision of his, his vision of her vision, and her vision of his vision of her vision' (Ch.19, p.152).

The notion of an inaccessible vital principle was central to organicist accounts of life, this deferring the discovery of the essentially mechanical and determined nature of the organism. In art, the discourse of life, the endless talk about art objects as if they are vital, similarly defers an encounter with the residually synthetic. Such discourse operates as a kind of macro-fiction whose task is the enabling of life-saving illusions. As Nietzsche had it:

67. Henry James, *The American Scene* (London and New York, 1907); Letter to Henry James, 4 May 1907; The James Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard: bMS Am 1092.9 2936.

art approaches as a saving and healing enchantress; she alone is able to transform these nauseating reflections on the awfulness or absurdity of existence into representations wherewith it is possible to live.⁶⁸

More potently, perhaps, fiction predicated on organicist principles can be seen as a factory 'where ideals are manufactured', a factory that reeks 'with the crassest lies'.⁶⁹ Collectively, we are Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*: if we stop telling stories, we die. Forced upon us is an acknowledgement of the vital importance of being ignorant, and Nietzsche's contention that 'untruth' is a 'condition of life'.⁷⁰

As George Eliot had it:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.⁷¹

Peter Rawlings
Kyushu University

68. F.W. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy; or, Hellenism and Pessimism* (1872), in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol. XIII, p.47; originally, *Die Geburt der Tragödie; oder, Griechenthum und Pessimismus* (Leipzig, 1886).

69. F.W. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic* (1887), in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol. XIII, p.47; originally, *Genealogie der Moral* (Leipzig, 1887).

70. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1866), in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol. V, p.9.

71. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, 1965), Bk. 2, Ch. 20, p.226.