

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 32 (2015)

Artikel: The aesthetics of poetic self-representation : Henry James's What Maisie Knew
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583867>

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The Aesthetics of Poetic Self-Representation: Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*

Dustin Breitenwischer

Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew* is essentially "motivated from behind," which means that it follows the principle and the logic of a predetermined destiny. By referring to Clemens Lugowski's theory of narrative motivation, this essay discusses the ways in which *What Maisie Knew* must be read as a performative representation of its own aesthetic and poetic premises. James not only exposes the ambiguous workings of the literary text, but also the workings of the reader's hermeneutic endeavor. A close analysis of the novel's final sentence ("She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew") assembles discussions about the dissolution of the guardian figure, the self-declamation of the novel as a work of art, its form-giving agency for the space of aesthetic experience, and, ultimately, the meaning of the poetics of literary motivation.

I

Henry James ends his 1897 novel *What Maisie Knew* on the infamously ambiguous and essentially open note: "She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew" (649). On the level of the plot, "she" is Maisie's guardian Mrs. Wix, and Maisie is, at this point, the young adolescent who, in the course of the novel, had to endure the unpleasant divorce of her parents, their respective new marriages, and their renewed break-ups. Yet, and this comes as no surprise for the experienced reader of James's (later) novels, there is more to this final sentence than the generation of closure of a most unnerving story. In fact, even though Mai-

Literature, Ethics, Morality: American Studies Perspectives. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 32. Ed. Ridvan Askin and Philipp Schweighauser. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 73-85.

sie's decision to stay with Mrs. Wix after decidedly breaking with her parents produces a certain degree of satisfaction on the part of the reader, her rigorous elusiveness leaves us with more questions than answers. As the novel is structured by the continuous emergence of new beginnings – the succession of conflict and resolution, new conflicts, and ever-new resolutions – and the hope to finally leave behind an aggravating past, the end of the narrative cannot and, for that matter, *must not* be understood as the promise of a satisfiable closure, but rather as the tautological possibility of exposing ever-new emerging possibilities. The ending of the novel reveals itself as the opening of yet undefined rooms for wonder.

Throughout the novel, Maisie is a close observer of her immediate surroundings. As she grows older (from being a little girl to becoming a teenager) her cognitive abilities develop impressively. She is a character who seemingly *notices* everything around her and, at the same time, she is one who is seldom *being noticed* by her surroundings. In fact, she often seems to be merely a plaything in the endless charades her parents play; tossed around but utterly neglected. It is only due to her changing guardians and, ultimately, the narrator that Maisie finds recognition as a character who so desperately tries to understand the world she lives in. Yet even though she is paid increasingly more attention by others, her parent's rigorous negligence of her leaves her stunningly opaque – barely more than a riddle to her close ones, and only a hazy void for the imaginary longings of the reader. Maisie rarely ever acts upon her knowledge; instead, she becomes a catalyst of her stated fact that “[e]verything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors” (419). James's deliberate play with Maisie's knowledge is, as David McWhirter convincingly argues, “an aspect of his reflexive realism” (241) – a reflexivity which is substantially turned into an aesthetic principle. Despite the fact that in the beginning of the novel young Maisie “learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock” (419), the novel's final sentence teaches us about the existence of a room whose closed door must not repel us but excite our existential will to throw it wide open.¹ Maisie lives in “a world of shifting identities and selfish utilizations, [. . .] one that by its nature obstructs her own full

¹ In his attempt to discern readerly figures in James's later novels, William Veeder refers to Maisie as “another model reader” (231), quoting the sentence about her knowledge of everything having something behind it but curiously leaving out the fact that she is afraid to knock – an anxiety that disarms her curiosity and makes her a rather questionable reader. I would rather argue that Maisie is not an allegorical reader but the gateway to a space for the trials and tribulations of our readerly experience.

understanding of it (and ours as well)” (Heller 77), and she therefore lacks the means to fully escape the logic of that world. For her, “it is the only world there is” (77). Yet in accordance with the consequences of the narrative motivation of and in James’s novel, and the aesthetics of poetic self-representation that I will introduce and discuss shortly, the reader is offered an exit strategy.

II

Despite the justifiable fact that we might understand the indecisiveness of *What Maisie Knew*’s ending both as the logical conclusion of an indecisive narrative and as the result of a causal necessity of story and plot, I argue that it is the other way around. *What Maisie Knew* is essentially *motivated from behind*, a concept I take from Clemens Lugowski’s 1932 study *Die Form der Individualität im Roman*, in which the author ventures into the literary history of narrative motivation. Lugowski aims at a more complex understanding of narrative motivation by way of supplementing the *causal motivation* with the so-called *final motivation*, or *motivation from behind*. The motivation from behind is driven by “the meaning of the moment of conclusion” (66; my translation).²

While the *motivation from the front* is grounded, as Winfried Menninghaus notes with regards to Lugowski, in the “psychological motivation from the protagonists” (162), the latter refers to “an objective performance of the genre’s rules oriented toward a fixed goal” (162). For Lugowski, motivation means, first and foremost, the plausible interconnectivity of the plot and the (above all, psychological) repercussions of action-reaction-schemes. Thereby, the questions about what is motivating and what is motivated are turned into poetic play, in which the motivating exists solely for the sake of the motivated. With regards to our daily lives, this seems to be a most counter-intuitive ambiguity. In fact, by way of giving an example, Lugowski notes that normally death (as what is motivating) could not possibly occur for the sake of the pain it causes; but if we turn to motivation as a poetic device, a given narrative might very well be geared toward a character’s pain rather than driven by the death of a character that is causing the pain. The pain then becomes more important than the death causing it (Lugowski 67). And should

² In the German original, Lugowski writes “*die Bedeutung des Ergebnismoments*” (my emphasis). For an extensive introduction to Lugowski’s theory, see Martínez, *Doppelte Welten* (13-36).

such evocation of pain be the plot-driving, i.e., the motivating force, we might concur that it “motivates from behind.” To put it in Lugowski’s words: “The result is not determined by the premises of the plot, but the different traits of the plot are determined by the result that demands its disclosure” (75; my translation).

In modern, or, rather, post-archaic literature, the motivation from behind has been increasingly replaced by the use of the motivation from the front. “This shift,” Menninghaus comments, “conforms to the ‘spirit’ of the hermeneutical view of literature in that it allows the reader to establish a continuum of sense from the psychology of the protagonists to the course of the plot” (162). The motivation from behind operates with the force of a “higher principle,” a lawful order acting outside the actions and motifs of the characters in the plot. It is my contention that, in James’s novel, this “higher principle” is paradoxically the very “spirit of the hermeneutical view” that Menninghaus refers to. What is usually *motivating* from the front turns into that which is *motivated* from behind: the longing to know in our quest to understand. This paradox can in part be explained with Lugowski’s theory itself, simply because the final motivation is at times mimicking the causal motivation, meaning that, as Heinz Schlaffer argues, “the fateful ‘motivation from behind’ is disguised as a causality-simulating ‘motivation from the front’” (*Poesie* 111; my translation). Lugowski himself calls this the *mythic analogon*, i.e., the appearance of the mythic and archaic legacy in all post-ancient literary narratives.

In a remarkable way, the reader of James’s novel is exposed to a great irony, for the “result that demands its disclosure” is utterly undetermined. This raises a question: What does it mean when the narrative is not *causally motivated* by the opening question of *what Maisie knew* (which may not be a question grammatically but effectively), but *finally motivated* and structured to arrive at the unmistakable openness of being a retroactively motivating question?

III

“She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew.” The final sentence is not a plea to re-read the novel in order to finally unclothe the truth about Maisie’s *knowledge*. It is rather an emphatic circumscription of reading’s core potential to repeatedly unconceal (in the strong Heideggerian sense of *entbergen*) our own quest of *understanding*. The final sentence is thus a plea to accept and celebrate, and, in the end, to aes-

theticize the “wonder” of wondering itself, and to therefore re-venture into the mysteries of the text. The reader is not exposed to the calmness of closure but to the emergence of the fundamentally open. And as there is “*still* room for wonder,” the reader must understand that the peculiar openness of the novel’s ending refers to its own temporal dimension of existing *still* and thereby repeatedly and to an indeterminate end. The openness of the “room for wonder” is extraordinarily and performatively tautological, as it is a space of possible temporal open-endedness.

Hence, the experience of reading the final sentence is, in fact, a potentially open-ended event (*Ereignis*) of radical openness: it marks the appearance of the moment in which we have, as Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, “acquired a new horizon within which something can become an experience” (348). The title of the novel is hereby excitingly misleading, as the narrative does *not* disclose what Maisie knew. It is, quite to the contrary, the disguising of a most fundamental question, namely the question of what can be known after all. In fact, after one has finished reading the novel, it becomes noticeable how surprisingly dismissive the narrative has been throughout with regards to what Maisie actually knew, could have known, or did not know. It stages itself *as a novel* and, hence, as the aesthetic plea to keep on asking. The narrative is not driven. It is motivated by its innermost drive – its motivation from behind. This poetic scheme is not only characteristic for *What Maisie Knew* but in many ways constitutive for the entire oeuvre of James’s later novels and novellas. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, James practiced what Heinz Ickstadt calls “the professional exploration of the medium itself” (*Roman* 23; my translation).³

Therefore, I argue that the motivation from behind that eventually accelerates the narrative to arrive at an inconclusive question, a mode of “wondering” – which had been the motivating principle all along – is James’s way of staging the poetic program that is characteristic for several of his later and late works.⁴ At first, we must more closely discern the role of the “she” who “still had room for wonder.” Here, James is relying on a most dominant figure in realist literature, namely that of the *guardian*. But, as has already been noted, the “she” in the final sentence breaks loose from its subject of signification and takes on a rather

³ See also Britzolakis; Litvak.

⁴ In comparison with my claims put forth in this essay and with regards to James’s late poetics, Winfried Fluck discusses very similar issues in his reading of James’s 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw* in *Das kulturelle Imaginäre* (285-91).

analogous existence. James has the guardian figure Mrs. Wix wonder because it ultimately allows him to offer her role to the reader. The “she” thereby becomes a play-space of readerly appropriation.⁵

Winfried Fluck argues that it is the task of the famous guardian figure in James’s later novels to educe the secret from the other characters (*Imaginäre* 287). The ambiguity of the text (and its diverse meanings) ought to be accepted as a reception-aesthetic strategy in which the role of the guardian and the role of the pupil are no longer distinguishable (287). In James’s later novels, the guardian figure is no longer analogous with the text as an educating force. As far as the novel itself is concerned, the reader has become an “equal interlocutor” (288; my translation). A didactic mode of instruction has been replaced with a hermeneutic mode of reflection. As Fluck puts it, “by way of refusing access to the ‘mystery’ of the text, James’s novels from the 90s refer the reader to her own interpretative fantasies of ownership” (289; my translation). The reader is, in short, intentionally thrown back onto her own experience, her “room for wonder.”

The shift of the guardian figure from a diegetic character to the reader eventually marks the partial dissolution of that figure and its properties. What is more, the devaluation or, at least, the re-signification of the guardian figure radicalizes the emphatic self-declaration of the text as a work of art. Since the normative mode of education has turned out to be inefficient, the text stages itself as an agent of rigorous aesthetic and poetic self-representation. The reader is thereby, very much like Maisie, turned into a catalyst that is perfused by the potentiality of her experience:

The experience’s potential of transformation can only be realized in the “experimental isolation” of the artwork because only the latter is able to show the self-regulatory capabilities of a system that is no longer depending on a guardian. The artwork has finally taken the place of the “educator” as a civilizing agent. (Fluck, *Imaginäre* 290-91; my translation)

James thus provoked a paradigm shift with regards to the aesthetic and poetic premises of the novel as such. As to the final sentence and the final motivation of *What Maisie Knew*, we must therefore look for a possible conflation of James’s poetic program, the aesthetic potential of the

⁵ I am using the term “appropriation” in accordance with Heinz Schlaffer’s introduction of the term in his essay “Die Aneignung von Gedichten” (“The Appropriation of Poems”) in which he argues that the acting personae in a poem necessarily need to be appropriated by the reader, so that the latter acts as if she were that respective persona.

text as a work of art, and the appearance of the hermeneutic “spirit” in the motivating fate of the deliberately open ending.

IV

“She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew.” Due to the suspension and the concomitant re-appropriation of the role of the guardian, the room for wonder opens up dramatically before the reader. What is more, the practice of *wondering* is not aimed at an understanding of Maisie’s knowledge but is triggered by and grounded in the sheer unknowability of the latter. As we saw in Fluck’s observations, James has turned the novel as such from a classically “closed,” educating, and ultimately revealing medium into a room for wonder, meaning that he formulated a poetic program that understood the work of art as the “open” and opening appearance of an innermost secret. As John Dewey puts it: “Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment” (17). Hence, there is an essential openness in experience and eventually in the aesthetic object itself.

In *What Maisie Knew*, we encounter the consequences of an aesthetic decision that has strong ethical repercussions, as the reader of the novel is neither in need to be educated nor merely (or yet) tied to “the hope of warming his shivering life” (Benjamin 101). James’s novel rather promotes the reader to a self-sufficient recipient of the radically open and restorative work of art.⁶ Despite the fact that James is still tied to aesthetic premises of a substantially ordered and cohesive structure (and is necessarily so with regards to the larger realm of his literary project), he daringly opens that structure up to openness itself.

The dissolution of the diegetic guardian figure and the quasi-pragmatist (Deweyan) reconsideration of experience and aesthetic object put us, as readers, into a two-fold state split between the role of our narrative assignment and the active poetic appropriation in which we are made to understand the fact that *we* “still had room for wonder.” In almost modernist fashion, James turns the poetics of his novel from meta-commentary into a performative act, leading to the point where the novel itself actively and playfully reveals its own being. By doing so,

⁶ The novel as a work of art “signals the transition of a realist project that is aimed at the civilizing completion of the American into literary modernity with its international emergency association of individual readers who are, by now, no longer united by a national promise but by the belief in the artwork’s civilizing potential of renewal” (Fluck, *Imaginäre* 291; my translation).

it turns itself into a room for wonder, i.e., a space in which the experience of our immediate life-world and the potentiality of our imaginary faculties clash most noticeably and creatively. Hence, the “room for wonder” turns out to be the self-representation of the novel as a work of art. Yet if we want to understand and ask for the meaning of this very self-representation, we need to discern the innermost workings of the work of art itself.

V

In “The Origins of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger (in)famously argues that the work of art – as what is essentially unconcealing the Truth – is characterized by a conflict, in which, Heidegger writes, “the Open is won within which everything stands and from which everything withholds itself that shows itself and withdraws itself as a being” (59). The “Open” clears when the conflicting opponents decisively “move apart” (59) and confront each other. The conflict and, hence, the “Open” must be understood as the appearance of a “rift (*Riss*)” (61). But “the conflict is not a rift as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather it is an intimacy with which opponents belong to each other” (63).

Wolfgang Iser turns to Heidegger’s idea of the rift but strips it from its Truth-driven pathos, claiming that as the rift opens up, it becomes “a sign of what by nature is irreconcilable: being and nonbeing” (*Fictive* 292), of what *is* (i.e., the properties of the work of art) and what *is not* (i.e., the appearance of the imaginary’s *gestalt*). By turning to yet another Heideggerian concept, Iser claims that those irreconcilable opponents are engaged in an intricate mode of so-called “dual-countering” (*Gegenwärtigkeit* 234). If we consider the aesthetic semblance of James’s “room for wonder” to be reminded of the novel’s newly discovered potential of poetic self-declamation, that very “room for wonder” most literally *appears* as the self-staging of the rift. Thereby, the work of art becomes the representation and declamation of its essence. It stages the horizon to which it points at the same time.

To recapitulate, the “room for wonder” opens a space that allows us to observe the self-reflective workings of James’s poetic strategy. But since Iser has not yet considered the rift to be of aesthetic quality but used it as a structural analogon for the *workings* of the work of art, I claim that the very “room for wonder” is significantly self-exposing and, as such, the aesthetic appearance and the performance of the novel’s poetic principle in the spirit of the aforementioned “experimental isola-

tion.” This, furthermore, means that the room is not simply a space *to* which we are metaphorically exposed, but that it is also and, most excitingly, a space *in* which we are exposed to the form-giving processes of our aesthetic experience. The “room for wonder” is a space of experience.

VI

Every work of art is constitutive of a space in-between through which it is capable to represent its own spatiotemporal performance, thereby making the self-representation itself available for the aesthetic experience of the recipient. The work of art playfully finds ways in which it is always already the representation of its own aesthetic premises.⁷ As my analysis of James’s novel has shown so far, it is by way of aesthetic self-declaration that art and literature must be considered extraordinary forms of communication in and for modern culture, for it is in the work’s emphatically playful manner where we understand that “knowledge of what man is can only come about in the form of play” (Iser, “Representation” 245). James manages to show that the work of art is a most extraordinary way for the self-representation and recognition of this “form of play.”⁸

By leaving the reader with a deliberately hazy image of Maisie and the all-encompassing “room for wonder” which is constitutive of her, *What Maisie Knew* exposes the reader to a space of unexpected but ultimately motivating possibilities, a space of imaginary immersion – a space *in-between*. I claim that the reader is closing the act of reading the novel by entering or, to be more precise, by being made aware of having always already been roaming through a radically self-reflective space of aesthetic self-representation, which is itself predicated on James’s poetics of individual “experimental isolation.” As we are isolated in order to radically expose ourselves to the aesthetic presence of our own imaginary “room for wonder,” we are in many ways instructed to look at our-

⁷ In my dissertation *Die Kunst dazwischen zu sein*, which is currently being prepared for publication, I have dealt with this issue more intensively. With regards to the aesthetics of poetic self-representation in modern literature, see my “Look at this tangle of thorns.”

⁸ See also Iser, “Play of the Text.”

selves looking into the potential and the appearing *gestalt* of that very room.⁹

In “Representation: A Performative Act,” Iser most generally claims that aesthetic experience constitutes a space in-between, in which we are “both ourselves and someone else” (244). To some extent, the in-between could be understood as the translation of the physical space between the place of reception and the place of the work into an imaginary third space that synthesizes both these places. This is the spatial practice of a “halfway state” and, as such, the venue for “an interplay between its constituents” (Fluck, “Search” 181). The space in-between is a space without borders, a space that is radically open both to the physical reality and the depicted world.¹⁰ With regards to a literary text, the reader is thus able to immerse herself into the fictive “as if” world without fully losing herself to the playfully deceiving reality of the text.

The aesthetics of poetic self-representation – the staging of the in-between as the motivating final cause – is appealing to James because his later works are distinctly marked by a curious “position of indeterminacy, which activates both the reader’s enhanced act of imagination and interpretative engagement” (Fluck, “Individuum” 1005; my translation). It is in and through this readerly enhancement that the “room for wonder” is turned from an agent of “experimental isolation” into a spatial practice that becomes an aesthetic testing ground for the reader’s experience, but that also captures “the affinity between the aesthetic, the moral, and the social imagination” which has significantly shaped “late-nineteenth century America” (Ickstadt, “Concepts” 97).¹¹

⁹ In many regards the self-reflective meta-conception of ourselves as observers – as bystanders to ourselves – ties in with James’s overall concern with the representation of visuality in his later novels. As Christina Britzolakis puts it quite pointedly: “If *What Maisie Knew* places at its center the question of representation itself, it also imbricates that question with processes of spectacle and commodification specific to the emergent discursive order of the late nineteenth-century imperial metropolis. The novel’s investment in spectacular forms of performance and display addresses the industries of the image that were dynamically reshaping urban experience” (“Technologies” 370).

¹⁰ As Elizabeth Grosz argues, the in-between is a space “without boundaries of its own, which takes on and receives itself, its form, from the outside, which is not *its* outside” (*Architecture* 91; my emphasis).

¹¹ At this point, it is only appropriate to briefly mention and acknowledge the ways in which *What Maisie Knew* is also a performative representation of its twisted contemporary morality, for it “considers modern child custody arrangements and the plight of children whose divorced parents remarry with unprecedented, dizzying speed” (McWhirter 239).

VII

Implementing the *motivation from behind* allows the novel's narrative to be driven by the self-representation of its poetic strategy, its aesthetic premises, and its hermeneutic openness. And in order for James to use the motivation from behind as a poetic performance of the workings of literary hermeneutics *and* as an aesthetic principle for the self-staging of the reader's experience of the former, he initiates a cunning scheme: he does not expose what is motivating from behind as the final knowledge of a most certain fact, but as the open and concentric process of eternal inquiry.

Yet his novel is not the (proto-postmodern) celebration of an ironic exposition of utter meaninglessness. Quite on the contrary, *What Maisie Knew* exposes and thereby celebrates human *Dasein* as a deficient being essentially and existentially engaged in a lifelong quest for meaning. This quest must propel the reader to long for ever-new aesthetic experiences because, as Iser tells us, it is in and through aesthetic experience where that which *is* and that which *is not* engage in a most productive, i.e., *meaningful* conflict. In *What Maisie Knew*, James dramatizes the novel as the aesthetic placeholder for that quest. This is, most significantly, the reason why he dares to undertake such a paradoxical move and turn hermeneutic openness into the destined goal that is fundamentally motivating the progress of the narrative. This is why he dares to turn infinity into the ending and the ending toward infinity.

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