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Maisie's Spasms: Transferential Poetics in Henry James and Wilfred Bion

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a reading of Henry James's midcareer novel *What Maisie Knew* (1897) as a study in group psychology. Maisie, James's child heroine, is at the center of an expanding and transforming family group that includes various governesses as well as her divorced parents' multiple new partners. I set James's novel beside Bion's *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (1961) and its Kleinian approach to the continuities and discontinuities between individual and group experience. Rather than insisting (as Freud tends to) only on a narrative of individuation and adaptation, Bion emphasizes the necessity and difficulty an individual inevitably experiences in making contact with the emotional life of the group in which she lives. James casts the frustrating necessity of group experience in entirely theatrical terms, figuring Maisie from the start as a spectator to, and eventually an active participant in, the affective circuits of those around her. In my reading the transferential poetics of James and Bion make available the affective, transindividual nature of knowing as a contingent activity that takes place between persons and other objects. The essay concludes by unfolding some of the surprising televisual aspects of James's late style.

How useful might it be to think of Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) as a study in group psychology? The particular group I have in mind consists of all the characters in the novel who take on or are given the task of bringing its main character, Maisie, successfully to the end of her childhood. Ordinarily or normatively this would be the work of the family group, but the motivating interest of James's plot is exactly the degree to which the members of Maisie's immediate family, and later of her unusual extended one, are just not up to the task. The novel tells the story of a young English girl of divorced, hateful parents (Ida and Beale Farange) who use Maisie in their warfare against one another — “the little feathered shuttlecock they could fiercely keep flying between them” (James, 1897b, p. 22). When both parents remarry (Ida to Sir Claude, Beale to Maisie's governess Miss Overmore), the child's movement between households eventually brings together her new stepparents, who care for Maisie more attentively than her biological parents but whose guardianship serves, at the same time, as a pretext for the emerging adulterous relationship between them. Add to this middle-class late Victorian mix another governess, Mrs. Wix; the maid Susan Ash; and brief but crucial appearances by Ida's and Beale's various lovers, and one gets a quick sense of just how large, varied, and otherwise preoccupied a group of guardians and near-guardians James's plot forms around its central figure.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe Maisie as slightly off center, given to us by way of the narrator's intimate distance. Not exactly a character, James's narrator is (as much of the criticism has noted) a definite presence in this novel, which has as its guiding conceit, according to the preface in the New York edition, the telling of the tale through the child's perceptions: “To that then I settled—to the question of giving it *all*, the whole situation surrounding her, but of giving it only through the occasions and

connexions of her proximity and her attention; only as it might pass before her and appeal to her, as it might touch her and affect her, for better or worse, for perceptive gain or perceptive loss” (James, 1897b, p. 7). The narrator is formally positioned, as it were, very close to and just behind Maisie’s head, an analyst’s position, which permits him (although never specified, it does seem to be a masculine narrator)¹ to make informed guesses as to what Maisie is feeling at any moment and whose job is to offer translation: “Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them,” and so “our own commentary constantly attends and amplifies” (James, 1897b, p. 8). I cast James’s narrator as a kind of analyst not to assign him a position of analytic mastery but rather to take account of his motivated attentiveness to stressful situations, what the novel repeatedly calls “muddle.” The preface puts it this way: “The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement. The great thing is indeed that the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has colour and form and character, has often in fact a broad and rich comicality, many of the signs and values of the appreciable” (James, 1897b, p. 11). The distressed comedy of James’s novel follows upon the narrator’s patient, ironic, gently sadistic willingness to let Maisie stumble through any number of painful situations in order that we may profit from her perceptions and confusions, revisions to her understanding, and a gradually gained ability to give verbal form to the “appreciable.”

The position of James’s narrator is surprisingly similar to that of Wilfred Bion’s in his book *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (1961), whose approach to group psychology I take up in this essay. Bion, an early practitioner and theorist of group therapy, means something quite different by this from the therapy of individuals assembled in a group; as he dryly explains in the first paper in his book, he means rather the therapy of a group as such, or the attempt “to make the study of their tensions a group task. ... It was disconcerting to find that the Committee seemed to believe that patients could be cured in such groups as these” (Bion, 1961, p. 29).² The first seven papers recount Bion’s often pained, awkward experiences with various groups, his estranging attempts to interpret a group’s dynamics to itself, and his constantly revised inductive theorizing of these dynamics. He describes his theories as “educated in the situations of emotional stress that they are intended to describe” (p. 142), and like both Maisie and her narrator, Bion is very much in the thick of things: “These occasions [of stress] provide the raw material on which interpretations are based, but the interpretation itself is an attempt to translate into precise speech what I suppose to be the attitude of the group to me or to some other individual, or of the individual to the group” (p. 143). Both James’s narrator and Bion act as amplifiers and translators of perception, especially perception of “the muddled state” that each associates with emotional stress and experiences of earliest childhood. Moddle is the name of Maisie’s first nurse, or the first she can remember, and Bion puts the particular, sometimes unbearable difficulties of being in a group this way: “The adult must establish contact with the emotional life of the group in which he lives; this task would appear to be as formidable to the adult as the relationship with the breast appears to be to the infant, and the failure to meet the demands of this task is revealed in his regression” (Bion, 1961, pp. 141–142).

Bion’s concluding overview essay makes explicit his book’s theoretical concern to bring Melanie Klein’s (1975) work on object relations to the study of groups to supplement Freud’s accounts in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929). For Freud, the family offers the basic pattern for group dynamics: individuals become members of a group by introjecting a father or leader figure, creating a shared ego ideal, conscience, or sense of guilt. Bion, on the other hand, brings Klein’s less paternalist thinking about infant experience to approach the varied, often discomfiting weirdness of groups: “The group approximates too closely, in the minds of the individuals composing it, to very primitive phantasies about the contents of the mother’s body” (p. 162). For Bion, groups form because of the inevitable regressive defenses against these fantasies; indeed his working definition of a group is “an aggregation of individuals all in the

¹On this projection of gender and other questions of the ethics of reading, see Miller (1990, p. 72).

²The “Committee” here is the Professional Committee of the Tavistock Clinic that encouraged Bion to explore his techniques of group therapy.

same state of regression” (p. 142). However, unlike most crowd psychologists before him who pathologize group behavior in masculinist and primitivist terms, Bion asserts that “the apparent difference between group psychology and individual psychology is an illusion” (p. 169). He places great value on what he calls the mental activity of the work group, or the skilled participation of a number of individuals in the cooperative performance of a task (p. 143). Such productive, task-oriented activity is always diverted or undermined by unconscious “basic assumptions” that give rise to various images of the leader, who, in Bion’s understanding, is more a consequence than a cause of group cohesion, someone (or something) that fulfills fantasy (projectively) rather than primarily threatening punishment (introjectively).

In the pages that follow I unfold Bion’s understanding of groups in a reading of James’s novel; for example, I hope to show that one of Maisie’s talents lies in her abilities to evade the leadership roles projected onto her and to stay focused on the task at hand: her own upbringing. But I am equally interested in how Bion’s writing itself exhibits Jamesian characteristics or complexities, as if something about both writers’ approaches to group dynamics leads to shared poetics. Bion’s style is especially reminiscent of James’s in its ironic depictions of the awkwardness of group experience. He conveys the discomfort of these situations while seeming to permit the reader a privileged distance from them, a distance that quickly vanishes as we become implicated in the group dynamics that are being described. For example, the book’s first paper begins with a narrative account of a typical encounter in group therapy. Bion (1961) points out the group’s inflated expectations of him and, “while waiting for the group to settle on its new course” (p. 31), digresses to explain to the reader what he thinks he is doing:

We are constantly affected by what we feel to be the attitude of a group to ourselves, and are consciously or unconsciously swayed by our idea of it. It will be seen at once that it does not follow that one should blurt it out in the way I have so far described myself doing in the group. This, I confess, must be regarded as peculiar, although if precedent were required, we are all familiar with certain types of people, particularly those who tend to feel persecuted, who behave in this manner. Not a happy precedent, the reader will think, and it will not be long before it is evident that the group thinks so too. But it is necessary now to return to the group, whom we left in the process of changing course [p. 32].

I find this passage strangely comic, with its abrupt, slapstick movements through multiple perspectives, mirrorings, and forms of address. The “we” that includes both Bion and his reader is rapidly followed by a shift in perspective (“It will be seen at once”) that distinguishes Bion from those of us who do not “blurt out” our perceptions of group attitudes toward ourselves—a “peculiar” form of confession that Bion reflexively emphasizes (“This, I confess”). The perspective then moves back to a “we” who are “all familiar with certain types of people,” presumably not us, immediately followed by Bion’s identification with precisely these people: his claim to know what “the reader will think” exemplifies the paranoia or persecution that he ascribes to others. By the time we are returned to the narrative, we may be left chuckling uncomfortably, wondering at the implications of these lurching movements or, more likely, wondering whether we are in the presence of a writer who might not be a little crazy.

Robert Hinshelwood (1991), in a brief discussion of this style, suggests that Bion “perfected a trick of describing certain psychic processes, while at the same time engaging in just that process during the act of describing it” (p. 235). In the aforementioned example, one effect of this style is to communicate something like the discomfort experienced by members of the group: a reader is invited to participate in a set of oscillating dynamics of identification and differentiation that takes place both in Bion’s narrative and in the nondiegetic, reflexive relation between the book and its readers. I understand these abrupt movements, both within the narrative and between narrative and reader, as one aspect of a transference poetics shared by Bion and James. Bion hesitates to use the term *transference* because he is not certain whether his interpretive method with groups is identical to psychoanalytic method (p. 31). But I find the term useful to summarize what is shared by both writers (as well as the other writers of my study): a close attention to emotional states and movements of affect, both within and between individuals; an amused, patient, and nonmoralizing attitude toward the messes or muddles that accompany these states and movements; a willingness to risk humiliation or contamination in describing

these aloud; and an allowance for sudden, unpredictable changes of course that might follow these descriptions. As discussed in my introduction, the term *transferential poetics* generalizes a Kleinian notion of transference, which Hinshelwood describes this way: “In the transference something is *constantly* going on, the analyst is constantly being used. This is not the analysis of resistance and defence, it is the playing out, in the relationship with the analyst, of subtle and often extremely obscure object-relations” (p. 214). To subscribe to a transferential poetics, then, would be to propose that all interactions (including those between reader and text) play out obscure object relations. As a consequence it pays to be attentive to the fundamentally transferential and group-ish nature of knowing or learning: how the activity of knowing takes place between or among persons or between a person and other objects; how knowledge changes depending on context or situation, becoming possible or emergent in some relationships or configurations and impossible, forgotten, or recessive in others.³

James’s (1897b) commitment to a transferential poetics underlies his novel’s turbulence, the sense it conveys of a rollicking, rambunctious romp, enjoyable, exciting, and also somewhat nauseating, especially for graduate students reading it in seminar.⁴ One of the novel’s running jokes is Maisie’s lack of proper education, her shuttling between households and caregivers making any progressive, formal schooling, or the fantasy of such schooling, impossible to sustain. Her frequent changes of location and shifts of allegiance involve sharp movements through steep learning curves that the narrator depicts in terms of sudden drops and losses of balance—these are the spasms of my title. When, for example, without warning, Sir Claude moves Maisie from her mother’s home back to her father and Mrs. Beale’s, “it was like being perched on a prancing horse, and she made a movement to hold onto something” (p. 108). The narrator associates these rollicking movements almost definitionally with Maisie’s changing knowledge. In this same scene Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale bond over what they describe as Maisie’s “fatal gift of beauty,” by which they claim to mean her “charm of character.” “Oh I know all about that sort of thing!”—she fairly bridled with the knowledge” (p. 107): the narrator’s description of Maisie’s response likens her to the “prancing horse” of the next page, as if her knowledge threatens to knock her off balance and trample her underfoot or needs to be reined in. At the same time Maisie’s “bridling” knowledge is associated with the possibilities of her child-bride appeal and the accompanying dangers that she seems to become aware of in the very next sentence: “It gave Maisie somehow a sudden sense of responsibility from which she sought refuge” (p. 107).

Such sudden movements and drops around Maisie’s knowledge, or our being made acutely aware of them through the narrator’s attention, signal James’s (1897b) attempt to drop to “some deeper depth of irony than the mere obvious” (p. 4), as the preface puts it. Presumably the obvious irony is the juxtaposition of innocence and guilt, the irony of a young girl being thrown into a milieu in which she is exposed to promiscuous sexuality and becomes a pretext for adultery. But James’s explanation of the “full ironic truth” (p. 4) of his tale involves a complicated reversal between the adults who are supposedly in the know and the child who is not nearly so innocent. Maisie’s name connotes mazes of bewilderment and confusion as well as the *mays* of plural permissions and possibilities, and it is her ability to induce vicarious wonder, shame, and fearful self-awareness in her guardians that, according to James, makes for the deeper irony. My larger goal in placing Bion and James alongside one another, then, is to approach from a less familiar angle what might otherwise be cast as a child’s acculturation, socialization, and loss of innocence. With Bion’s work on groups in mind we might redescribe Maisie’s trajectory not so much in Freudian (or even Kleinian)⁵ developmental terms but this way: over the course of James’s novel Maisie is continually acquainted with the particular necessity and extraordinary difficulty of making contact with the emotional life of the group in which she lives.

³For a discussion of a transpersonal space of thinking in James, see Cameron (1989), especially pp. 63–76 on *Maisie*. Cameron’s concern here is with “tension arising from the shifting barrier between consciousness and repression” (p. 64), whereas my reading orients not toward a classical psychoanalytic understanding of repression but toward an object-relations approach to phantasies of the group.

⁴These observations arose in the graduate seminar Affect, Print and Film held at the University of British Columbia in the fall of 2005. I am grateful to the seminar participants: Kate Hallemeier, Matt Hiebert, Matthew Kennedy, Victoria Killington, Rachel Kruger, and Peter Sun.

⁵Harvey (1991).

The novel's great contribution is to cast this frustrating necessity and its consequences in theatrical terms. From the start Maisie is figured as a passive spectator to events beyond her understanding and control, "a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre" (James, 1897b, p. 18). As I show in more detail, Maisie's spectatorship structures the novel until, in its final chapters, she takes the stage and begins to speak so that her words have significant consequences for the actions, feelings, and decisions of those around her. In my reading the novel's transmutation of spectatorship into acting offers a narrative of vindication rather than development, a reading that contrasts with those critics who attempt to determine what Maisie knows in reductively sexual terms. James does not permit his readers this kind of determination; his transferential poetics motivate the interrogative mood and tense of the novel's title. What Maisie knows at any given moment is only ever anybody's best guess, including her own, routed through fundamentally vicarious relations and assessed only retrospectively. The novel's ending—"Oh I know!" the child replied. Mrs. Wix gave a sidelong look. She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew" (p. 275)—comes full circle to offer readers a sense of continuing, lively possibility for this uncanny young person with the capacity for getting what she needs from those around her.

Before diving into the novel's group dynamics I would like to explore how vindication, for James, partly comprises theatricality in a number of interesting ways. Consider how James (1987) puts theatrical form and vindication into relation in one of his notebook entries on *Maisie*, part of a set of notes in which he develops his famous remarks on the "scenic method." He first describes his pursuit of "a really detailed scenario" for the novel, how he seeks an "intensely structural, intensely hinged and jointed preliminary frame," and goes on to assert that "each little chapter *is*, thereby, a moment, a stage" (James, 1987, pp. 161–162). The critical literature has long pointed out that *Maisie* was one of a handful of novels written just after James's 5-year effort to gain financial support by writing for London's commercial stage, which ended with the opening night of his play *Guy Domville* in the winter of 1895. Although his two main biographers differ in their interpretation of his theatrical career and the consequences of the partly negative audience reaction at this opening night, both agree that James did not succeed in reaching the larger theater audience he was hoping for.⁶ As the story goes, James recouped his emotional losses by developing a compositional method that used act and scene structure as well as drawing-room dialogue in the novels he wrote during the second half of the 1890s, including *The Other House* (1896), *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897a), *What Maisie Knew* (1897b), and *The Awkward Age* (1899), a scenic method that crucially informs his late style. In the notebook entry on *Maisie* (1987) that I have been quoting from, James's theatrical self-talk culminates in a sort of ecstasy: "Ah, this *divine* conception of one's little masses and periods in the scenic light—as rounded ACTS; this patient, pious, nobly 'vindictive' application of the scenic philosophy and method—I feel as if it still (above *all*, YET) had a great deal to give me, and might carry me as far as I dream!" (p. 162). The editors' footnote at the word *vindictive* reads, "HJ corrects this to 'vindicating' in a note at the top of the manuscript page" (p. 162). Certainly this notebook entry can be read as expressing James's vindictiveness toward the audience that rejected him as well as his sense of vindication of his chosen *métier*, the novel form. But the note also raises two questions that I want to pursue here: How, specifically, are vindictiveness and vindication related? And how might they both accompany or motivate the scenic method and, perhaps by extension, theatricality itself?⁷

The novel helps to answer these questions by immersing us in the dynamics of vindication from its first sentence: "The litigation had seemed interminable and had in fact been complicated; but by the decision on the appeal the judgment of the divorce-court was confirmed as to the assignment of the

⁶See Novick (2000) for a useful alternative to Leon Edel's (1985) version in *Henry James: A Life*.

⁷For an example of a reading that proposes that James rejected the theater for the novel's more intimate one-to-one relation to audience or reader, see Rosenbaum (2006). But see David Kurnick's much different and, to my mind, more interesting way of accounting for James's relations to theatricality in "Horrible Impossible." Kurnick (2005) argues that *The Awkward Age* (James, 1899) should be read as "a sustained exploration of the possibilities of resisting" the form of the novel of psychological depth and suggests that James "demur[s] from the idea of interiority in favor of a model of group consciousness" (p. 110). I am exploring one such model here, although not one that is opposed to interiority. I will return to Kurnick's argument about Jamesian theatricality and his late style at the end of this essay.

child” (James, 1897b, p. 13). James’s mock officious style sets the stage for characters who struggle to clear themselves from censure, to assert their interests, to claim ownership or possession, in other words, to vindicate themselves. Each “bespattered” parent fights to keep Maisie from the other, but they both fail when the court decides to share her equally between them. Their own motivations are absolutely vindictive: “They had wanted her not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other. She should serve their anger and seal their revenge, for husband and wife had been alike crippled by the heavy hand of justice” (p. 15). In presenting his novel’s concern with the consequences of divorce, James’s first few pages draw a powerful link between vindication and vindictiveness: how the affective force of a righteous, punitive anger and resentment underlies the legal and performative dimensions of vindication. *Vindicare*, etymologically “to claim, set free, punish, or avenge,” conjures up an archaic scene of slavery undone by violence, or conversely, mastery enforced. Vindication invokes the general question of rightful claim to ownership and, with regard to persons, the legal relations between guardian and dependent. The novel’s modern theme of divorce taps the ancient political problem of relations between full citizens or subjects and their dependents, political ties that are affectively structured.

If James’s (1897b) prologue immediately establishes its concern with the performative dynamics of vindication and the feelings of anger, resentment, and humiliation that underlie them, it also locates these dynamics in an intensely public, theatrical social space. The judgment to divide Maisie’s time between her parents is considered “odd justice in the eyes of those who still blinked in the fierce light projected from the tribunal” (p. 13), and it is this stage lamp of justice that shows both parents to be entirely artificial or superficial, their good looks, showy clothes, and outrageous behavior making them unsuitable parents and perfect objects of gossip in a chattering world. Despite the “reverberation, amid a vociferous public” (p. 14) that the child be left with “some proper third person, some respectable or at least some presentable friend” (pp. 13–14), the novel’s prologue leaves the child alone and unprotected—except for the narrator, whose first-person pronoun a reader encounters for the first time in the sentence that introduces Maisie’s proper name. The narrative style quickly moves from the officiously impersonal to the subtly perspectival, bringing the child under the narrator’s, and therefore the reader’s, protection, both improper (because neither biologically nor legally assigned) first-person protections of the child. Although Maisie is financially secure “thanks to a crafty godmother” (p. 17), this only serves to make her an ideal 19th-century heroine: emotionally vulnerable and economically a going concern.

By placing a young girl with dubious protection in a spectacular public realm, the novel offers an updated version of the plot of innocence or virtue in distress, a plot informed as much by 19th-century French melodrama as by earlier English novels of sentiment. As Peter Brooks (1976) has suggested in an influential argument, melodrama should be considered an important aspect of James’s poetics insofar as it allows him to explore fundamental psychic sources of meaning and value or what Brooks (1976) terms “the moral occult” (p. 5).⁸ Brooks characterizes melodrama as “the desire to express all” in which “the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship” (p. 4). If this style of utterance would initially appear as distant as possible from James’s own, Brooks offers convincing arguments for the specific place of melodramatic forms, plots, and goals in what he terms James’s “melodramas of consciousness.” The significance of expression or saying all lies in melodrama’s “rhetorical breaking-through of repression” (p. 42), the effort to name and make legible those emotional or psychological states and relationships that constitute ethical choice in a postrevolutionary, “post-sacred era” (p. 15): “melodrama as a form exists to permit the isolation and dramatization of integral ethical forces, to impose their evidence and a recognition of the force of the right” (p. 157).

I redescribe Brooks’s (1976) valuable insights in the rather different theoretical terms of this book so that I can specify the relations between vindication and theatricality. Brooks operates within a classical Freudian framework that opposes repression to expression, but as I argue elsewhere, these should be understood in

⁸See also Levy (1957).

deconstructive tandem, not as distinct mechanisms so much as emergent properties of a motivational system in which the affects themselves serve both to amplify and inhibit one another. Where Brooks recasts the unconscious as “the moral occult,” thereby assimilating affective to ethical considerations, I turn to what Silvan Tomkins (1961) calls the General Images, those guiding goals for the affect system, conflicts between which generate a great deal of complexity, as it were, before moral considerations come into play. The conflicts inherent in our fractured and multiplied affective lives underlie and help to constitute what we tend to describe in the more cognitive terms of ethics or beliefs. If melodrama is viewed primarily as a form of expression that is, like Poe’s writing, strongly guided by Tomkins’s Image of “minimizing affect inhibition,” then its pleasures come more from experiences of an intensity, range, and combination of positive and negative affects and their amplified expression than from ideological or ethical resolutions of plot and character per se. These resolutions, which Brooks analyzes by way of what he calls “the aesthetics of astonishment,” are fundamental to melodrama: virtue must be made to suffer by going unrecognized, then must be acknowledged and vindicated in a “drama of recognition” (p. 27); villainy, which “constitutes the active force and the motor of the plot” (p. 34), must astonish as much as or more than virtue. The ethical resolution to the drama should primarily be understood in terms of an affective balance between these forces in which the vindication of virtue depends upon an equivalently intense vindictiveness that can be assigned, or conveniently handed off, to the villain, whose anger and resentment are necessary to motivate the vindication of virtue. It is the affects themselves that are vindicated by melodrama, or to put this another way, melodrama is the literary form that vindicates their expression.

In this context melodrama may be taken to highlight a fundamental aspect of theatricality itself, that aspect which aims to minimize the inhibition of affect.⁹ James’s scenic method takes up the melodramatic mode for his own compositional purposes: to put it to work as an instrument of lucidity when faced with the muddle of confused or contradictory affective states. Consider Brooks (1976) on the notion of character: “If one conceives character as that theatre for the interplay of manichaistic forces, the meeting place of opposites, and his [*sic*] self-expressions as nominations of forces at play within himself—himself their point of clash—the role of character as a purely dramaturgic center and vehicle becomes evident” (p. 101). Redescribing these “manichaistic forces” as positive and negative affects (or good and bad part-objects) permits me to offer a somewhat different reading of James’s novel than Brooks does. Brooks proposes that “What is never seen—and is queried in the last line of the novel as in its title—is the extent to which Maisie knows what lies *behind* the behavior of different adults, and combinations of adults, in her regard,” which is the “essentially sexual” nature of human motivation of which Maisie remains “largely ignorant” (p. 166). But to take up this particular psychoanalytic privilege and assert, as a reader, that we know what Maisie doesn’t is to miss something fundamental: that Maisie permits the relations that form around her to become richer, deeper, and more complex precisely by not becoming predictable or determined in the manner that the “essentially sexual” risks. In Tomkins’s (1961) terms, the sex drive becomes an interesting source of motivation only in the context of an affect system that amplifies and transforms it; the sex drive becomes sexuality, in all of its complexity and relations to knowledge, only in proximity to the freedoms of the affect system.

James’s novel invites an attention precisely to the relations between affect and sexuality. I return now to Bion’s understanding of group psychology in a more sustained reading of the novel’s theatricality. From the start Maisie is figured, in Brooks’s (1976) terms, as a “purely dramaturgic center and vehicle,” a spectator at a violent, confusing performance whose ability to understand is a function of her vision:

It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before. Only a drummer-boy in a ballad or a story could have been so in the thick of the fight. She was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre [p. 18].

⁹See Eric Bentley’s (1964, pp. 195–218) discussion of melodrama as “the quintessence of drama.”

James (1897b) casts Maisie as the hyperbolic heroine of an epistemic romance whose “patience” or passivity is a consequence of the way her parents enlist her in their battles. Not only does each freely abuse the other in the child’s presence but each also requires her to repeat their insulting messages to the other, and these insults and adult talk more generally constitute her phantasmagoria. The second chapter introduces Maisie’s first important lesson: how not to parrot or repeat her parents’ words. She arrives at “the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment” (p. 23) from an exchange with her first governess at her mother’s house, the pretty and upwardly mobile Miss Overmore. In response to a question from the child as to whether she should convey yet another insulting message from her mother to her father, Miss Overmore blushes and laughs, then communicates her negative answer nonverbally: “Her companion addressed her in the unmistakable language of a pair of eyes of deep dark grey” (p. 24). This look brings to Maisie’s mind a memory of an accidental meeting at the park between the flirtatious governess and the child’s father, which Miss Overmore had asked Maisie not to mention to her mother. At the same time that we receive a glimpse of what will become a sexual relationship between Maisie’s father and her first governess (they eventually marry), we are also given the progress of Maisie’s spectatorial skills: she begins to read facial expressions, to understand what is not said but expressed by way of the eyes. Although adult talk may be confusingly phantasmagoric, Maisie learns quickly about nonverbal expression and the motives for speaking and keeping silent.

Immediately, then, Maisie is given to us as someone for whom the skills of spectatorship are crucial for her survival. James’s (1897b) narrative technique manages to convey Maisie’s expanding perceptions at the same time that it communicates, at least partially, the increasingly complicated sexual and financial transactions among the adults. But the novel is careful neither to oppose our knowledge and Maisie’s nor to identify them; rather it tracks and ironizes the ways that the adults use their relationships with Maisie to work out their own situations. For example, in a conversation between Maisie and her stepfather, Sir Claude, she proudly asserts that, just as she has brought together her father and her former governess, now Mrs. Beale, she has also brought Mrs. Beale together with Sir Claude (p. 72). He laughs at the implications of this, and when Maisie goes on to assert that she has brought him together with her current governess as well, the ugly and elderly Mrs. Wix, he laughs again and half-jokingly asks the child to bring him together with Ida, his wife and her mother. This exchange conveys both the growing antagonism between Sir Claude and Ida and the emerging relationship between Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale—which Mrs. Wix terms the “extraordinary muddle” (p. 67) of their situation. It also places Maisie at the projected center of what Bion (1961) would call a “pairing” group. This is one of the three kinds of “basic assumption” groups that, Bion suggests, exist alongside any work group, the other two being the dependent and fight-or-flight groups. Bion describes the pairing group after observing in his meetings the emergence of specific pairs who monopolize group discussion; these pairs are accompanied by “a peculiar air of hopefulness and expectation” (p. 150) in the group, which finds verbal expression in ideas about the future. Bion characterizes this feeling of hope or expectation as “both a precursor of sexuality and a part of it”:

The optimistic ideas that are verbally expressed are rationalizations intended to effect a displacement in time and a compromise with feelings of guilt—the enjoyment of the feeling is justified by an appeal to an outcome supposedly morally unexceptionable. . . . For the feelings of hope to be sustained it is essential that the “leader” of the group, unlike the leader of the dependent group and of the fight-or-flight group, should be unborn. It is a person or idea that will save the group—in fact, from feelings of hatred, destructiveness, and despair, of its own or of another group—but in order to do this, obviously, the Messianic hope must never be fulfilled [p. 151].

In James’s novel it is Maisie herself, or more precisely the idea of her education, pursued but never fulfilled, that acts as the leader of the pairing group. The adults brought together around Maisie argue over which possible configuration of caregivers will best serve the child; meanwhile the actual task of teaching her is jeopardized precisely by feelings of hope for her salvation and their own. The more she is cast in the role of either savior or saved, the more the adults pair off.

The work of raising Maisie is made more difficult by the other basic assumption groups as well, especially the dependent group, which, Bion (1961) writes, assumes that it has met “to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection” (p. 147). Rather than a strong individual with a magnetic personality, the leader is “an individual whose personality renders him peculiarly susceptible to the obliteration of individuality by the basic assumption group’s leadership requirements” (p. 177). Sir Claude gets cast in the leadership role for the dependent group most often. Attractive and charming (all the women in the novel love him), weak and susceptible, he fits Bion’s description as a “leader by virtue of his capacity for instantaneous, involuntary (maybe voluntary too) combination with every other member of his group” (p. 177). The dependent group is instanced whenever Mrs. Wix and Maisie imagine Sir Claude leaving Ida and taking a house for the three of them. The fight-or-flight group makes its appearance, with Mrs. Wix as its leader, when Sir Claude finally acts at the governess’s instigation and steals Maisie away from her stepmother’s place to bring her across the English Channel. Rather than offer detailed readings of the appearances of these various basic assumption groups in the novel, the point I take from Bion’s writing concerns the relation between individual experience and the basic assumptions: “I think the struggle of the individual to preserve his distinctness assumes different characteristics according to the state of mind of the group at any given moment. ... Individual distinctness is no part of life in a group that is acting on the basic assumptions” (p. 170). Although the work group demands cooperation from individuals and therefore requires that individuals recognize themselves and their own distinctive skills or contributions, the basic assumption groups, which exist alongside the work group, encourage phantasies of dependence, pairing, or fight-or-flight; in these basic assumption groups individuated experience becomes indistinct in the various fantasies of projected leadership. Bion agrees with Aristotle’s assertion that the human is a political animal but asserts that “the power of the group to fulfill the needs of the individual is ... challenged by the group mentality” (p. 55). Group dynamics, both necessary and frustrating, always involve a movement between the assertion of individual needs or aims and the forgetting, overwriting, or indistinction of these needs or aims in group fantasy.

Maisie must use the group that has formed around her to fulfill her needs, but her success—her ability to make individuated emotional contact with the group—will require its dissolution. As she grows older and learns to recognize and accommodate her fear of the increasingly precarious instability in her situation, her sphere of perception gradually widens. The first two thirds of the book can be read, chapter by chapter, in terms of Maisie’s increasing perceptual abilities to understand what is going on around her; recall James’s (1987) explanation in one of his notebook entries on the novel that “each little chapter *is*, thereby, a moment, a stage.” The novel continues to figure “the sharpened sense of her spectatorship” as “the child’s main support,” which “gave her often an odd air of being present at her own history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass” (pp. 90–91). But two thirds of the way through the novel the narrator gives up on the chapter-stage structure that had carried him, and us, so far: “Maisie had known all along a great deal, but never so much as she was to know from this moment on. ... It was granted her at this time to have divinations so ample that I shall have no room for the goal if I attempt to trace the stages” (James, 1897b, p. 159). The last hundred pages describe a compressed roller-coaster ride of several days (by contrast to the preceding decade or so, covered by the first part of the novel), during which Maisie’s knowledge grows exponentially as she confronts each of her potential guardians, imagines herself in several different configurations, and finally forces a choice between them.

Maisie’s exponential growth is a consequence of her genuinely difficult situation: she has finally been cut off from her biological parents, who have each taken still other lovers and given Maisie up to her stepparents. The scenes in which Maisie is given up are remarkable, as the narrator manages to communicate the parents’ extraordinary selfishness and narcissism to the reader and, at the same time, to convey their “goodness,” in Maisie’s eyes, giving her a crucial emotional stability. At Mrs. Wix’s instigation, Sir Claude steals Maisie away from her father’s house and takes her across

the English Channel; Mrs. Wix wants to “save” Sir Claude, as she puts it, from the predatory women he is surrounded by, a desire prompted in part by her own love for him. Mrs. Beale has other ideas: she wants to adopt Maisie with Sir Claude to legitimate their adulterous relation. The conflict between Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale over Maisie’s allegiance leads Maisie to ask her governess, “Why shouldn’t we be four?” (James, 1897b, p. 209), which prompts Mrs. Wix to try to explain to the child the precise “crime” (p. 210) she is being asked to abet. Maisie’s struggle to understand the differences and similarities between the various emotional, financial, and sexual transactions among her parents, stepparents, and guardians (who pays whom, in what currency, with which binding consequences) eventually brings Mrs. Wix to her own sharp question: “Haven’t you really and truly *any* moral sense?” (p. 214).

It is one of the ironies of James’s (1897b) novel that he locates the moralizing and sexualizing reading of Maisie’s knowledge together, rather precisely, in the character of Mrs. Wix. Introduced as poor, uneducated, and bespectacled, Mrs. Wix is saved from complete caricature by offering Maisie something no other character does: a “sense of a support, like a breast-high banister in a place of ‘drops,’ that would never give way” (p. 31). Mrs. Wix is *the* maternal figure in the novel, a consequence of the intensity of their vicarious relation: Maisie serves as a replacement for her dead daughter. This vicarious relation emerges in an early scene, when Maisie leaves Mrs. Wix to return to her father’s house, a separation the narrator compares with a recent visit to the dentist to have a tooth pulled: “Maisie, at the dentist’s, had been heroically still, but just when she felt most anguish had become aware of an audible shriek on the part of her companion, a spasm of stifled sympathy” (p. 33). Mrs. Wix’s spasm is a vicarious lurch that enacts Maisie’s anguish; her shriek, reproduced when they part, now gives voice to the pain of both. James’s irony is not aimed at their vicarious relationship as such but rather at Mrs. Wix’s role as storyteller. Instead of offering Maisie lessons in specific subjects, she “took refuge on the firm ground of fiction ... her conversation was practically an endless narrative, a great garden of romance” (p. 32). Of course, this puts her in direct competition with the narrator, who seeks to protect Maisie from Mrs. Wix’s sense of what fiction should offer, the kind of instruction that results in “a moral sense.”

For Mrs. Wix, a moral sense—which includes, most relevantly, a condemnation of sex outside of marriage—is the one thing remaining for Maisie to learn, and she sets about teaching it, despite the narrator’s misgivings, on a carriage trip the two of them take through the French port town: “She began, the poor child, with scarcely knowing what it was; but it proved something that, with scarce an outward sign save her surrender to the swing of the carriage, she could, before they came back from their drive, strike up a sort of acquaintance with” (James, 1897, p. 215). James here invokes the literary historical connection between carriages and sex (scenes of “if this van’s a rockin’, don’t come a knockin’” in, for example, Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*).¹⁰ Maisie does begin to acquire some new knowledge, as indexed by the rocking movement of the carriage, but what she learns is not the condemnation that Mrs. Wix teaches. From this scene on, the theatrical figure of spectatorship changes and permeates the novel differently. It changes, first, by way of another expansion of the child’s perceptions: her capacity to enjoy her surroundings, “the splendour of the afternoon sea, and the haze of the far headlands, and the taste of the sweet air” (p. 215). No longer behind glass, Maisie begins to feel a new, sensuous relation to her knowledge as she strolls down the beach with her governess at sunset: “She looked at the pink sky with a placid foreboding that she soon would have learned All. They lingered in the flushed air till at last it turned to grey and she seemed fairly to receive new information from every brush of the breeze” (p. 216). Maisie, it appears, has lost her virginity (one kind of virginity) to Mrs. Wix, and later that same evening in their hotel room Mrs. Wix is “bewail[ing]” the fact that, in order to introduce to Maisie a moral sense, she has had to explain so much, to “throw up at you the badness you haven’t taken in” (p. 218). Maisie, somewhat oppressed by this conversation, lingers on the balcony:

¹⁰Thanks to Michael Moon for this observation.

The night, this time, was warm and one of the windows stood open to the small balcony over the rail of which, on coming up from dinner, Maisie had hung a long time in the enjoyment of the chatter, the lights, the life of the quay made brilliant by the season and the hour. Mrs. Wix's requirements had drawn her in from this posture and Mrs. Wix's embrace had detained her even though midway in the outpouring her confusion and sympathy had permitted, or rather had positively helped, her to disengage herself. But the casement was still wide, the spectacle, the pleasure were still there, and from her place in the room, which, with its polished floor and its panels of elegance, was lighted from without more than from within, the child could still take account of them [p. 218].

The balcony with its rail, the space of the spectator, continues to support Maisie as she watches the spectacle; but suddenly, by a trick of the light, the space changes—the hotel room, “with its polished floor and its panels of elegance,” reflects the lights coming from outside to become continuous with the spectacle itself. When Maisie turns inside to respond to Mrs. Wix, she takes the transformed domestic stage and begins to act: “She appeared to watch and listen; after which she answered Mrs. Wix with a question” (p. 218). Maisie moves back and forth from balcony to hotel room—“She hung again over the rail; she felt the summer night; she dropped down into the manners of France” (p. 218)—and listens to a musical performance, “a song about ‘amour.’ Maisie knew what ‘amour’ meant too, and wondered if Mrs. Wix did: Mrs. Wix remained within, as still as a mouse and perhaps not reached by the performance” (pp. 218–219). Maisie’s knowledge of love, with all its undecidable sexuality, is here equated with a knowledge of performance. The reader soon sees Maisie dissemble and observe herself (p. 220), choosing words with the intention to convey specific meanings, for example, words that “she hoped as she looked away, would guarantee her moral sense” (p. 221). Instead of a moral sense, Maisie has developed the art of acting.

Maisie has been developing this art during her many years as a spectator, and her skills are not confined to self-observation and dissembling. They are transmutations of spectatorship by way of an increasingly sensuous perception and an expanded attention to nonverbal communication. In the definition that I think James (1897b) is implicitly offering in this novel, acting is equated with “amour”: the capacity to enter into complex affective circuits or relations with one’s self (or selves) and others, to speak and act, with regard to one’s self, in ways that have meaningful consequences for the feelings and behavior of others. Rather than simply watching while others make decisions that alter her life, Maisie begins to impede and transform their actions and meanings. These new capacities are exhibited in all the remaining scenes of the novel, but they are most forcefully expressed when she goes out for breakfast with Sir Claude and he asks her if she is willing to give up Mrs. Wix and join him and Mrs. Beale in an unconventional household arrangement in the south of France. This conversation takes place at a café “with wide, clear windows and a floor sprinkled with bran in a manner that gave Maisie something of the added charm of a circus,” a space of performance where she senses “a sort of ordered mirrored licence, the haunt of those—the irregular, like herself—who went to bed or who rose too late” (p. 247). As she “watched the white-aproned waiter perform as nimbly with plates and saucers as a certain conjurer her friend had in London taken her to a music-hall to see” (p. 247), Maisie begins to experience herself as one of these bohemians or performers, that is, someone who does not need to subscribe to her governess’s norms of sexuality or morality. But, as becomes clear from the conversation with her stepfather, neither will she subscribe to Sir Claude’s.

At the beginning of their conversation Maisie notices his fear, which she reads as fear of himself, and this permits her to recognize and understand her own fear of herself, one of the many instances in which her learning is vicarious. Maisie is afraid of her newfound agency, her capacity and willingness to act on her desires, to love or hurt one person and not another. At the train station she suddenly proposes to her stepfather that he take her to Paris. They are both terrified at the prospect—is it a proposal or a proposition?—and he hesitates until it’s too late. Maisie’s fear then dissipates: “She had had a real fright but had fallen back to earth. The odd thing was that in her fall her fear too had been dashed and broken” (James, 1897b, p. 262). This sudden movement indexes a new awareness, and she is finally able to answer Sir Claude: she will give up Mrs. Wix if he gives up

Mrs. Beale. He is startled, and Maisie sees how afraid he is of what she thinks of as his “weakness,” that is, his inability to be consistent with his own strongest intentions, in this case, his love for Maisie. In the extraordinary, climactic scene at the end of the novel, which takes place in the hotel room, Maisie finds herself at the excruciating center of contention between the adults. Mrs. Beale insists that the child belongs with the stepparents, Mrs. Wix refuses to leave her with them, and Sir Claude finally makes it clear that he cannot take Maisie up on her offer and that he is willing to let her go. In the middle of all this extreme melodrama Mrs. Wix reminds Maisie of her moral sense and demands, “*Haven’t I, after all, brought it out?*” But all Maisie can summon is a dim memory: “Then it left her, and, as if she were sinking with a slip from a foothold, her arms made a short jerk. What this jerk represented was the spasm within her of something still deeper than a moral sense. She looked at her examiner; she looked at the visitors; she felt the rising of the tears she had kept down at the station. They had nothing—no, distinctly nothing—to do with her moral sense. The only thing was the old flat shameful schoolroom plea. ‘I don’t know—I don’t know’” (p. 268). Maisie is crying for the train that left the station, that is, the dashed fantasy or wish of the pairing group, that she and Sir Claude would finally be together. Her spasm indexes her acknowledgment of despair and destruction, the end specifically of the relationship with the stepfather she wants. But she is also crying because of a different conclusion, the success of the work group that, against all odds, has brought her to the end of her childhood. Maisie has learned to assert her needs, to make individuated and forceful contact with the group, even while this contact also destroys the very group that has both failed to fulfill and succeeded in fulfilling these needs.

This reading of James’s novel itself participates in the basic assumption of the pairing group. In describing this group mentality, Bion (1961) writes, “It is as if there could be no possible reason for two people’s coming together except sex” (p. 62), and my suggestion that Maisie’s proposal to Sir Claude may amount to a proposition certainly partakes in it. But I hope that I have also achieved my primary task, which has been to show that James’s novel offers specifically theatrical terms for understanding the difficult relations between individuated experience and group fantasy. As much as these theatrical terms apply to Maisie’s own narrative experience, or her uneven development from spectator to actor, they also apply to James himself, whose powerful identification with Maisie may account for some aspects of the uncanniness of this child. The concluding sentences of James’s (1897b) preface bring out the nature of this identification: “The active, contributive close-circling wonder, as I have called it, in which the child’s identity is guarded and preserved, which makes her case remarkable exactly by the weight of the tax on it, provides distinction for her, provides vitality and variety, through the operation of the tax—which would have done comparatively little for us hadn’t it been monstrous. A pity for us surely to have been deprived of this just reflexion” (pp. 11–12). James distinguishes Maisie along the lines of her affective-perceptual capacity for “wonder,” claiming that this wonder both protects her identity and justifies the “tax” he puts on it, in other words, his narrative’s sadism. According to James, then, Maisie’s wonder distinguishes and protects her while distinguishing and vindicating James himself, his narrative choices and clinical, case-study perspective, all in the service of offering readers a seemingly detached experience of “reflexion.”

This set of gestures firmly locates readers in what Joseph Litvak (1992) called the Jamesian “theater of embarrassment,” which, rather than offering any reliable position of detachment, “shows both author and readers moving back and forth across the footlights” (p. 214).¹¹ Tuning in to James’s (and Bion’s) transference poetics has permitted me to pay attention to the relations between theatricality and not only embarrassment or shame but also vindication and the anger or resentment that underlies it. In my reading of James’s (1897b) novel, vindication appears to operate with respect to theatricality on at least three levels. Within the narrative Maisie vindicates herself: she takes the stage and asserts her individual distinctness from the group on which she depends by refusing the various projected leadership roles. At the level of method James’s melodrama of

¹¹For another assessment of the central place of both shame and theatricality in James, see Sedgwick (2003).

consciousness works as a compositional technique that vindicates the expression of positive and negative affects themselves and their complex, muddled relations. Finally, vindication takes place metanarratively as James distinguishes and justifies his own choices for an audience that he presumes to be hostile to some aspects of his project. His presumption of hostility is not wrong; the defensive tone of the concluding sentences of his preface should not be read simply in terms of misguided projection. As Litvak has shown, critics of James have often expressed anger toward his writing, whether in terms of its supposed vagueness, abstraction, moral confusion, or its queerness. I suggest that the hostility that James addresses and tries to ward off points, once again, to the strained relations between individual and group or what Bion (2004), in a later emendation of his thinking, describes as the relation between the genius and the Establishment.

These terms resonate with 1960s-era romanticism, but Bion's (2004) use both taps and expands these meanings: "I propose to borrow this term [the Establishment] to denote everything from the penumbra of associations generally evoked, to the predominating and ruling characteristics of an individual, and the characteristics of a ruling caste in a group (such as a psycho-analytical institute, or a nation or group of nations)" (Bion, 2004, p. 73). His use of the word *genius* or *mystic* is similarly inclusive, meaning both "exceptional individual" and a mode of exceptional thinking that Bion seeks for the purposes of improving psychoanalysis. Indeed what makes these essays (especially "The Mystic and the Group" and "Container and Contained") so strange is that Bion is sketching a theory of the relation between individual and group and, at the same time, a theory of thinking that he casts in the most general terms of the relation between container and contained. I take up Bion's theory of thinking in some detail elsewhere. For now, it is enough to point out that Bion understands the mystic, both person and idea, as a creative and destructive force whose existence the group requires but seeks to control or manage. At the same time, the mystic person or idea needs the group in order to exist at all but exerts an uncontrolled explosive force: "The function of the group is to produce a genius; the function of the Establishment is to take up and absorb the consequences so that the group is not destroyed" (p. 82). In what sounds like a borrowing from Gregory Bateson's anthropology, Bion proposes that the relationship between group and mystic may be "commensal, symbiotic, or parasitic" (p. 78): they may simply coexist, they may produce mutual growth, or they may be mutually destructive. But even the symbiotic or growth-producing relationship may be troublingly hostile, as the "mystic contribution is subject to close scrutiny" (p. 78) precisely because it holds the possibility of dangerous change for the group. By bringing this later understanding of Bion into the discussion, I do not mean to assert James's genius in the face of the critical establishment. Rather I read James's (1897) defensiveness and self-vindication at the end of the preface as an index to the often hostile relationship between individual and group. James identifies with Maisie's "distinction," her "vitality and variety" as they emerge in necessary relation to the "tax" that his narrative exacts, a tax that serves, precisely, as an image of the group and its demands.

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw out some implications of my reading of *What Maisie Knew* (James, 1897b) for understanding James's late style, of which the preface is an example, as well as the perhaps surprising relations between this style and the 20th-century theatrical medium of television. My approach to this subject shares something with David Kurnick's (2012) understanding of Jamesian theatricality. Kurnick reads a number of James's middle and late texts (written just before and after *Maisie*) to unfold a productive generic uncertainty in this mature writing, an equivocation between the spaces of the page and those of the stage. He argues that James "was unwilling to abandon the theatre as an imaginary referent. Instead, James created a bizarre fictional medium to convey the sense that these texts are sketches for a more robust but deferred theatrical enactment" (p. 112). Kurnick goes on to read the uniformity of James's late style—the odd way that many of the characters in his late novels sound, more or less, alike—against the grain of the critical tradition that insists on James's mastery of the novel form and its investments in individual psychology.¹² He proposes instead that "one thing Jamesian style wants is to replace the differentiating energies of the drama of consciousness with an equally compelling

¹²The chapter titled "Henry James's Awkward Stage" includes material from an essay on *The Awkward Age* (previously cited) as well as Kurnick, "What Does Jamesian Style Want?"

vision of collectivity and universalism” (p. 146), one that depends on rhetorical techniques that are indebted to a “phenomenology of theater” (p. 147); for example, Kurnick observes that James’s characters share an “actorly purposiveness” (p. 147) and “extra-diegetic consciousness” (p. 149) that are fundamentally theatrical and move toward a utopian, democratic group consciousness. Jamesian theatricality is “a technology of collectivization, a mechanism for the production of the plural” (p. 109), an attempt to envision an idealized, unattainable experience of collectivity.

As is clear, I entirely agree that James’s writing offers us access to collectives or groups in specifically theatrical terms. However, I do not agree with Kurnick’s argument that James describes group or collective experience in a primarily utopian mood or register, nor (relatedly) do I think there is any need to oppose individual to collective psychology in the way that interior is opposed to exterior. A great strength of Bion’s understanding of groups is that he theorizes the collective elements and energies of group experience as both positive and negative. By insisting on the productivity of the work group and the constant challenges posed by the basic assumption groups, Bion offers a sense of the constant and complex impact of group psychology on individual experience and thinking and indeed the occasional continuity between them. This conceptual continuity is a consequence of his Kleinian emphasis on unconscious fantasy and is closely related to what I described in my introduction as the hinge nature of affect. I recast some of Kurnick’s astute observations about late style in terms of James’s commitment to a transference poetics and close acquaintance with the theatricalization of writing. I also suggest that the “bizarre fictional medium” that James seeks to create may usefully be compared with television, a medium whose emergence coincides with the beginning of his late style. (Television was first named in a paper given in French at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris at the International Congress of Electricity.)

My point here is less causal-historical than aesthetic-formal: I want to draw out a set of analogies between writerly and televisual techniques. For as it turns out, James’s late work makes unexpectedly good television. I’m thinking in particular of the 1972 production of *The Golden Bowl*, perhaps the most successful of the James adaptations produced by the BBC.¹³ This novel would seem to be as unlikely a choice for television as almost any I can think of. But Jack Pulman’s script, which uses the novel’s language to a remarkable degree, understands how James’s intricate sentences, which sometimes need to be read aloud to be read at all, lend themselves to the near intimacies of the small screen. By turning a minor character, Colonel Assingham, into the narrator, Pulman offers television viewers a perplexed, calm, at once wryly detached and intensely interested guide to the narrative’s complex emotional transactions. Each episode begins with the colonel sitting in an armchair in his study or club speaking directly to the camera for minutes on end, smoking a pipe and, as one commentator puts it, “imparting to the viewer faintly conspiratorial confidences after his wife has retired to bed” (Barry, 2000, p. 122). Played with understated charm by the very talented Cyril Cusack and shot from medium-close to close range, the colonel’s narration engages viewers as if it were an unusually insightful and sustained series of after-dinner gossip sessions. Suddenly James’s late style makes all the sense in the world.

But what exactly makes televisual sense here? How can the particular intimacies or proximities of James’s late style be described? As a way to answer this question, consider examples of narrative style from works that have not been much explored, James’s plays, and more specifically his parenthetical stage directions. Whereas in James’s earlier plays the directions are spare and usually confined to descriptions of physical actions or clear, simple emotional states (e.g., *looking at his watch; with rising impatience*), the later plays offer greater numbers of directions of ever increasing subtlety (James, 1990, p. 94. By the time he wrote *The Saloon* (1908), parenthetical directions precede almost every line of dialogue and often pose as much a challenge as a help to an actor: “*as with something between a shrug and a shudder of apprehension*” (p. 662); “*with a certain arrest, a certain dryness*” (p. 662); “*with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on her; as if thinking of more things than he can say or than she’ll understand*” (p. 664). These later directions, although they still describe precise physical actions and emotional expressions, are not easily captured by simple verbal description.

¹³*The Golden Bowl* was directed by James Cellan Jones and dramatized by Jack Pulman.

James seems to want actors to convey affective states that are in between, both in between more ordinarily named and perceived feelings or movements (between a shrug and a shudder) and often defined in between two (or more) characters. It is difficult to imagine how any actor, no matter how talented, could convey such in-between feelings to an audience seated at any great distance from the performance. I think that the implied audience of James's late stage directions, then, is only as distant as the other actors on the stage, and as attentive.¹⁴

In characterizing his later style as televisual I am proposing that James's writing realizes a parlor scale of intimacy: he draws out circuits of affective communication between and among a handful of individuals who are physically proximate in the sense that they can hear each other speak at a conversational volume and can notice subtle inflections of voice, face, and body, and his writing places readers at a comparable imaginary distance. It may be useful to contrast James's narrative voice and its forms of intimacy with Poe's. Both writers implicate a reader by mixing insinuation with analysis, presuming intimacies without making clear the source of the presumption, which may therefore always be the reader himself or herself. But where Poe's intimacies take place as extreme close-ups (in-your-face, as I argue elsewhere) and concern individuals and their destruction, James's interest is less in individual coherence and decoherence than in the relations between individuals and groups. What I am calling James's televisual style accompanies his commitment to representing the movements of feeling among a handful of persons, including the reader or viewer, at a certain scale of intimacy. On television this intimate and inclusive spatial scale is accompanied by the expanded temporal scale of the serial, itself rooted in 19th-century novel form. Television's seriality offers another reason James's writing works well on television.¹⁵

Interestingly these spatial and temporal scales resemble the ones that Bion (1961) requires in his weekly group sessions, arranged with approximately eight or nine people. Bion chooses this size not because he believes that group psychology comes into existence only when a certain number of people are present; "in fact," he insists, "no individual, however isolated in time and space, should be regarded as outside a group or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology" (p. 169). Rather this scale is convenient for the purposes of demonstrating the transference or affective relations among the individuals of the group, for sharing evidence of these relations, and for giving "an interpretation without shouting it" (p. 168). If, as Bion suggests, the difference between individual and group psychology is an illusion, then James's late style, as it represents his increasing use of theatrical devices to stage affective relations among a number of persons, should be understood as part of a technique for investigating and making appreciable the phenomenon of group psychology.

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Notes on contributor

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¹⁴Kurnick (2012) also explores James's stage directions (specifically in the play *The Other House* [1909]) to make a related point: that they refer to "a reality conscious of its status as performatively constituted, a space in which the boundary between actress and character recedes into indistinction" (p. 124). In this way James's stage directions anticipate televisual reality, which works precisely to render indistinct the difference between actors and characters (as in the genre of reality television, itself based on the earlier game show genre). In my understanding this is primarily a consequence of the peculiar spatial scale of James's stage directions.

¹⁵While the recent film adaptation *What Maisie Knew* (2012), directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel, succeeds in capturing aspects of James's experiments with a child's perspective (especially by using complex sound spaces to offer unusual angles on adult conversations), it leaves out those aspects of the novel that address Maisie's changing relations to the adults around her over time. It would be challenging for film to span the six or eight years of the novel. I have not seen either the 1968 BBC television adaptation or Babette Mangolte's 1976 art film adaptation of James's novel.

to *Warhol* (Fordham University Press, 2015), co-edited, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Duke University Press, 1995), and is currently producing the Radio Free Stein project (www.radiofreestein.com).

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