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Child's Play, Toys and Pure Games:

Revising the Romantic Child in Henry James, Elizabeth  
Bowen and Don DeLillo

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Submitted for the examination of Doctor of Philosophy in English  
University of Sussex  
July 2018

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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Summary

This thesis analyses the opportunities that child's play presents for language, style and reading practices in the works of Henry James, Elizabeth Bowen and Don DeLillo, and the consequent forms of literary knowledge that this relationship between play and writing produces. I argue that James's work represents a shift in literary and cultural relationships with "childhood" and trace the ways in which, following his work, childhood becomes a resistant performance of obliviousness, an unreadable subjectivity reluctantly tied to, and at points struggling against, the objects and activities associated with the child at play.

In the introduction I delineate a shared history of representations of "childhood" and theories of play in order to locate what versions of the Romantic child still exist in modernist and postmodernist literature and theory. Engaging with work by Jacqueline Rose, Robin Bernstein and Daniela Caselli on the difficulty of delineating or interpreting childhood, I explore a literary preoccupation with the aesthetic value of an elusive childhood knowledge, and forms of not knowing such as innocence, located in child's play. Chapter one proposes that for James, the difficulty with reading the child is tied to the child as reader. In *What Maisie Knew*, James encourages what I term a childlike reading practice, which develops in response to an adult suspicion of childhood. The second chapter considers the ways in which imaginative child's play in Bowen's novels, and the work of the Romantic figure of the writer-as-child which emerges from the compulsion to appropriate this form of play, is continually disrupted by the materiality of toys. Often rendered impotent, these toys, such as tricycles and kaleidoscopes, interrupt modernity's narratives of progress, and rupture the value systems of the modernist novel that privilege difficulty and subjectivity. My final chapter identifies the ways in which DeLillo's novels attempt to redeem language by bringing pre-linguistic childhood babble into discourse to render accessible the secrets of childhood knowledge. DeLillo experiments with the pure games of poststructuralism only to contrast them with the play of the postmodern wild child able to navigate a post-apocalyptic wilderness of hyper-real simulacra.

These scenes in which writers engage with toys and child's play to conceptualise the work of writing a novel and their relationship with their readership, form a narrative about the changing versions of literary knowledge that are produced in attempts to represent "childhood" in the face of its loaded Romantic literary history and twentieth-century shifts in cultural fantasies invested in the idea of the alterity of child's play.

## Acknowledgments

This project is deeply indebted to my supervisor Pam Thurschwell for her consistent patience, guidance and support. Without Pam's attentive, insightful readings of my work and her unwavering enthusiasm for this project, it would never have come to fruition.

Additional thanks are due to my peers and members of faculty (both academic and administrative) in the School of English at Sussex for their advice and support throughout the project, and especially to my co-supervisor, Natalia Cecire, for her incisive comments on my work.

For their friendship and encouragement, thank you to Edward Delamare, Katie Da Cunha Lewin, Ellie Green, Chelsea Olsen, Charlotte Terrell and Adam Whitehall. Thank you to my mum, Irene, and brother, Chris, for their unrelenting patience and for always having confidence in me. Finally, thank you to Omar Raii for being there with me.

## Funding

This work was funded by CHASE (Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England).

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1.Introduction:Theorising the Child and Her Play

*There is nothing serious in mortality.*

*All is but toys.<sup>1</sup>*

Staged through an encounter with the death of a child, William Wordsworth's boy of Winander presents a story of the failure of reading. Wordsworth introduces this bewitching, death-driven wild child by situating him alone at night beneath the trees

And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands  
 Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth  
 Uplifted, he as through an instrument  
 Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls  
 That they might answer him. And they would shout  
 Across the wat'ry vale, and shout again,  
 Responsive to his call, with quivering peals  
 And long hallos, and screams, and echoes loud,  
 Redoubled and redoubled – concourse wild  
 Of mirth and jocund din. And when it chanced  
 That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,  
 Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung  
 Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize  
 Has carried far into his heart the voice  
 Of mountain torrents<sup>2</sup>

In pauses between the owls' responses the boy is carried into the silence of the surrounding environment: 'the visible scene / Would enter unawares into his mind'. The poem moves

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, A. R Braunmuller (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), stated by Macbeth, Act 2, Scene 3, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* of 1805, *The Prelude* 1977, 1805, 1850, Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (eds.) (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979) p. 172, Book Fifth, lines 370-384.

from this description of the silence invading the boy's mind to a blunt declaration of his death and Wordsworth's recollection of regular visits to the boy's grave. Taken by Geoffrey Hartman as the ur-Romantic child, this story of the boy's attempts to commune with nature, and the unanswered question of whether the owls were in fact ever responding to him, has been taken as a model for the 'missed encounter' of reading.<sup>3</sup> This model attends to the difficulty of reading the "innocent" child as him/herself a reader and leads to a writerly insight which associates this form of negativity or failure of response with a particular version of innocence. This negative innocence which circulates around ideas of writing and reading fiction has compelled my exploration of what happens when the presumed Romantic "innocence" of the child meets various sophisticated modernist or postmodernist versions of play.

Interpretative difficulty orbits around representations of children. This relationship between interpretative difficulty and childhood does not just relate to the difficulties that children experience in interpreting discourse, but also applies to the difficulty of theorising or delimiting the child. Since Jacqueline Rose's work on the subject in her ground-breaking book *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984) an increasing amount of critical attention has been paid to grappling with the difficulty, even *impossibility*, of representing or interpreting the child. This problem takes the form of the question: how do we represent and interpret the child without retrospectively constructing a mythologised version of childhood? Considering the impossibility of distinguishing between the voices of childhood and the discourse used to represent childhood, I will ask what forms of intimacy or dialogue can occur between adulthood and childhood? How close can we get to childhood, if at all?

The mythologised version of the child as a vulnerable innocent, which has been criticised by queer and feminist critical work on the subject of childhood, has become known

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, 'Reading and Representation: Wordsworth's "Boy of Winander"', *European Romantic Review*, 5:1 (1994) pp. 90-100, p. 92.

as the “Romantic child”. This Romantic child is founded in a distance between adulthood and childhood which then fuels the desire for proximity with childhood explored in many literary texts. This distance means that childhood persists as a site of cultural fantasy; childhood is inaccessible and irretrievable while simultaneously constructed as a version of innocent transparency. Unpicking this one-size-fits-all term I show who the Romantic child is, and in so doing explore why and in what form this paradigm for representing childhood continues into the twentieth century. To analyse the Romantic child as a revenant figure in modernist and postmodernist literature, I show certain challenging points of contact between representations of childhood and the Romantic child paradigm in the work of Henry James, Elizabeth Bowen and Don DeLillo. I address wide ranging examples of texts which revise the Romantic child in different ways, in so doing, reviving some of the more oblique qualities and functions associated with the Romantic child at the moment of its initial conception which I trace to Wordsworth’s poetry.

In order to focus in on the child’s resistance to interpretation, the functions of its enigmatic or paradoxical qualities, this thesis considers literary representations of the child at play and explores the multiple theories of play that have arisen in recent scholarship. For the purposes of this study I define childhood, not as a stage of development, but as a concept determined by the objects and activities associated with it; I therefore consider the ways in which literary representations of childhood engage with the material culture surrounding the child to create an impression of childhood, with particular attention to toys. To this end I analyse texts that are self-consciously concerned with the opportunities that play presents for language, narrative structure and reading practices, and the consequent forms of literary knowledge that this relationship between play and writing produces. This examination raises a series of questions: what is the relationship between the ways in which James, Bowen and DeLillo value the child’s knowledge? How do texts by these writers value forms of *not* knowing, such as ignorance or innocence, differently? What is at stake when we think about

the games of the Romantic child in relation to a precarious, postmodern terrain? If the idea of writing as play has come to be in some senses commonplace, how does thinking about play, instead, in relation to a history of representations of childhood change our perspective on its metaphorical association with literary production and critical labour?

## 1.1 Theoretical Concepts

### 1.1.1 The Romantic Child

The fixed version of childhood that dominated nineteenth-century representations of children, and indeed still persists today, has become known as the “Romantic child.” This image of the child was conceived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; it developed in the Romantic poetry of William Wordsworth, influenced by the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, and is captured by Joshua Reynolds in his famous painting *The Age of Innocence* (1788).



Figure 1: Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Age of Innocence*, 1788.

In *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Phillipe Ariès controversially proposes that there was little interest in the child in medieval society, and that attitudes towards childhood gradually changed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western philosophy saw a preoccupation with ontological and metaphysical questions in response to the burgeoning existential crises of rapid modernisation. The socioeconomic impact of modernisation and the corresponding shifts in experiences of personal and cultural identity formation led to a growing interest in childhood language and activity, such as play, as models for authentic, “natural” experience which might provide answers to pressing ontological challenges. Destabilising the theological concept of original sin, the myth of the Romantic child established the innocence and purity of the child; any perceived “corruption” was considered the result of social phenomena, not a quality essential to human nature.<sup>5</sup> Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), often considered crucial to establishing this shift, is concerned with the problem of developing a pedagogical practice which will teach the child necessary life lessons whilst preserving the child’s innocence.

In work by Rousseau and in Wordsworth’s earlier work influenced by him, the arbitrariness and over-adornment of language was blamed for distancing people from their relationship with the material world, considered a “natural” source of moral sustenance. Wordsworth begins *The Prelude* by emphasising this distinction between nature and what writing has become:

from my first dawn  
Of childhood, did ye love to intertwine  
The passions that build up our human soul

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962) pp.46-49.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau’s work on the child which contributed to transforming ideas of human nature is often analysed for its political consequences, for example its influence during the French Revolution. Ann Wierda Rowland argues that revolutionary France turned to Rousseau’s theories of childhood because it required the ‘legitimizing authority’ of nature. ‘France promises’, she writes, ‘to extend childhoods’ resistance to humanity’s “meagre vassalage” into a complete revolution.’ (‘Wordsworth’s Children of the Revolution’, *SEL*, 41:4 (2001) pp. 677-694, p. 678). Wordsworth similarly associates the French Revolution with childhood at numerous points in *The Prelude*.

Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,  
 But with high objects, with eternal things,  
 With life and Nature, purifying thus  
 The elements of feeling and of thought<sup>6</sup>

The presumed simplicity of the pre-lapsarian child – the ‘naked savage in the thunder-shower’<sup>7</sup> – was upheld as an ideal state of unmediated, transparent communion with nature. For this reason, the Romantic poets had a special interest in the imaginative capacity of children in relation to both the language of childhood and child’s play.

In line with John Locke’s theories on the subject, Friedrich Froebel suggested that play was essential to children’s development and as such should be integrated into education wherever possible. He is credited with developing the concept of the kindergarten and formulating a Rousseauian pedagogical practice which recognised the child’s unique requirements and capabilities. The identification of the uniqueness of childhood, which was explored further in Romantic poetry, delimited childhood and formed the distance between adult and child that has continued into the present. What was at the time a radical reinvention of childhood transformed throughout the nineteenth century into a simplified fixing of the innocent child, whose purity must be preserved.<sup>8</sup> This sequestered child had to be surveyed and kept at a remove from language, “seen but not heard.”<sup>9</sup> Though some humanitarian reform of the rights of young people has been attributed to the shift from a theological

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<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799’, *The Prelude 1777, 1805, 1850*, Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (eds.), New York: W. W. Norton & Co., p. 4, lines 132-137.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1, line 26.

<sup>8</sup> In accordance with this, Paul de Man asserts that the late nineteenth century was a ‘low point of obfuscation’ in the understanding of Wordsworth (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p. 83). He suggests that, in this period, ethical judgements were made at the expense of other readings and that as a result ‘the challenge of understanding his work remains almost urgently felt.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 84) Indeed, he argues that Wordsworth’s work is still evaluated by nineteenth-century standards (*Ibid.*, p. 85). My thesis will not concentrate on re-evaluating Wordsworth’s work; however, by analysing the ways in which modernist and postmodernist literature engages with some of his more complex representations of childhood it will contribute to scholarship that reassesses Wordsworth’s representations of children.

<sup>9</sup> This idiom has been traced to an anonymous poem for children entitled ‘Table Rules for Little Folk’ (1858) which reads: ‘I must not play, nor must I sing. / I must not speak a useless word, / For children must be seen, not heard.’ (Author unknown, *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, David Damrosch (ed.) (New York: Addison-Wesley Publications, 2002) p. 1712).

conception of childhood to an all-pervasive cultural perception of childhood innocence, Judith Plotz's work highlights how this ideal of an ontologically stable, "natural" childhood purity which separates childhood from adulthood, in some ways worked to discourage social intervention.<sup>10</sup>

The term 'Romantic child' has been used to characterise the persisting ideal form for representations of childhood and has come to connote the innocence, naturalness, vulnerability and simplicity of childhood. Plotz employs the term 'Romantic child' to establish Romanticism's production of the concept of childhood and its 'fixing' of a 'quintessential Child'; however, she also makes clear that there are many contrasting versions of childhood figured in Romantic literature.<sup>11</sup> Peter Coveny's *The Image of Childhood* similarly suggests that the term Romantic child is a fitting way of describing modern representations of childhood as it was the writers from the Romantic period that transformed representations of childhood.<sup>12</sup> My use of the term here is in accordance with both the term's more general usage and Plotz's specific definition. In his attempt to produce a comprehensive and consistent reading of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's aesthetic growth models, Stephen Prickett, similarly to Plotz, narrows down our understanding of British Romanticism, identifying many different 'romanticisms'.<sup>13</sup> Due to their close working relationship and comparable views on the interdependence of creativity and growth, Prickett groups Wordsworth and Coleridge as part of the same version of Romanticism. My analysis of the

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this see Ann Wierda Rowland's *Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), which examines in great detail the Romantic poets' invention of childhood. Hugh Cunningham's work on the history of childhood also details the influence of the Romantic poets on discourse around childhood, pinning their greatest influence to 1860-1930 (*Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London: Longman Group, 1995) p. 74). Developing this point, he discusses the ways in which Romanticism's focus on imagination impacted the lives of children by shifting the culture of childhood (including children's toys and literature) away from the popular didacticism of Locke (Ibid., p. 77). Barbara Garlitz more specifically explores the influence of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode on nineteenth-century discourse around childhood ('The Immortality Ode: Its Cultural Progeny', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 6:4 (1966) pp. 639-649).

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Prickett, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. v.

Romantic child will proceed from Prickett's division, focusing attention on the tensions produced specifically within Wordsworth's images of childhood. The version of childhood conceived through the poetical children in Wordsworth's work is, I intend to show, the version most apparent in modernist and contemporary representations of childhood.

Plotz's work on the Romantic child discusses the ways in which nineteenth-century culture appropriated and fetishized Romantic representations of children.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with this claim Anne Higonnet traces the Romantic child through the visual culture of the nineteenth century to explore what she terms the 'modern Romantic child', and in so doing she demonstrates the ways in which modern representations of childhood are still influenced by the Romantic child paradigm. Higonnet proposes that the modern Romantic child becomes what she has identified as 'the knowing child'.<sup>15</sup> Engaging with this idea, I will explore the ways in which any such modern 'knowing child' is rooted in the continuation of the Romantic child paradigm whilst analysing the ways in which modernist and postmodernist literature plays with the paradigm and in so doing resists and reinvents it. There is, I suggest, no coherent child in modernism; instead, there are many different versions of *childhood* that are defined by the objects that cluster around its representations and that owe much of their symbolic significance to their interaction with the myth of the Romantic child.

Childhood, then, is an ontologically unstable category. My thesis will focus on changes in the way childhood is delimited and theorised throughout the twentieth century and how literary representations of childhood engage with these shifts in discursive practices; I do not attempt to draw conclusions on the lived experiences of children. I do, nevertheless, want to probe the dialogue between material culture and literary representations of childhood

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<sup>14</sup> Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1998). Steven Mintz's work *Huckle's Raft: A History of American Childhood* also refers to the modern American child as the Romantic child.

by analysing the ways in which the texts included in this study construct and define childhood through association with the toys and games which are gathered around it. I suggest that through this dialogue with material culture, literary representations of childhood influence how children are perceived, and in so doing have a broader social impact; however, analysing what exactly this social impact is will not fall within the remit of this study. Instead, I am interested in the ways in which literature resists or reproduces certain versions of childhood. In order to do this, I will consider age to be a virtual concept determined by cultural and socioeconomic conditions, and will, by extension, borrow from Judith Butler's theories on the performativity of gender to think about childhood itself as performative. Discourses around childhood, then, enact and in so doing, produce what constitutes childhood. I will show that when these discourses are reproduced in literature they replicate this repetitive formula of enacting-producing by surrounding representations of the child with toys and games which script certain behaviours.

### 1.1.2 The Writer-as-Child: Appropriating Child's Play

James, Bowen and DeLillo engage with theories around child's play in different ways either to harness or challenge the radical potential of play as a method for conceiving of the literary encounter, a method through which to claim autonomous space for the writer, reader or novel itself. Arguing against Jacqueline Rose and James Kincaid, Robin Bernstein proposes that, instead of passively receiving culture, children have some agency which arises through dialectical interaction with the objects surrounding them. Bernstein explains that during this interaction children 'collectively forge a third prompt: play itself'.<sup>16</sup> This idea of the uses of play could be perceived as participating, to a certain extent, in a Romantic rhetoric which

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<sup>16</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Cultural Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) p. 29.

claims that play is a free activity stemming from an authentic, essential inner-self interacting with the external environment. Her intervention, however, performs the more complex task of probing the tensions between a socially constructed “childhood” and the lived experience of young people; the two she argues often exist in tension, a tension which demonstrates that children in some sense pre-exist “imagined” childhood.<sup>17</sup> Though Bernstein’s focus on reviving the question of agency in childhood could be considered Romantic, her work is intended to problematise the idea of the innocent Romantic child by indicating the ways in which children actively engage with material culture and by arguing that the Romantic child ideal only applies to white, middle class children.<sup>18</sup> Her use of play is more closely allied to object relations theory, such as work by D. W. Winnicott who posits that play is a ‘potential space’, a liminal third location between subject and object through which the child can test reality and come to recognise the differences or similarities between him/herself and others, or between his/her desires and the demands of the external environment.<sup>19</sup>

Winnicott shares a Wordsworthian interest in a primal opposition between subject and object, culture and nature, and the forms of mediation produced by these oppositions.<sup>20</sup> *The Prelude*, however, grapples with the death drive to restore unity between the mind and its external environment, and in so doing it develops a version of the child’s mind tied specifically to its imaginative capacity which emerges through an interactive dialogue with its environment. This interactive relationship between the child’s mind and its environment, which is put in motion during child’s play, works to foreshadow the dissolution of the opposition between subjective and objective experience that Winnicott proposes is part of the role of the potential space of play. This form of play for Wordsworth’s boy of Winander,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Bernstein proposes that innocence was linked to whiteness through the body of the child and that simultaneously ‘childlike innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender and ... race.’ (Ibid., p. 6).

<sup>19</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Penguin, 1974) p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> For work on the ways in which Winnicott’s idea of the transformative power of play is influenced by Wordsworth see John Turner, ‘Wordsworth and Winnicott in the area of play’, *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 15:4 (1988) pp. 481-497.

his attempt at becoming-owl or his artistic anthropomorphising of the owls, ultimately fails to create the unity he seeks as nature reasserts itself as the deathly interval in this dialogue. Childhood, which Wordsworth considers to be a time of pure experience, is then recollected and reflected upon by the adult poet and acts as the primary source of creativity, an innocent negativity which anticipates subjectivity's acquiescence to nature.

Wordsworth emphasises play in *The Prelude*, showing how it is in moments of intensely physical play in a natural environment that the child reaches levels of heightened emotion and imaginative power – a state of being at once joined with nature and transcendent. *The Prelude* is structured around formative 'spots of time' or memories of moments of heightened emotion often from childhood. As Marilyn Gaull explains, 'spots of time' are not passively received but, instead, function as a model for interpretation founded in delay and reflection.<sup>21</sup> These 'spots of time' can refer to intense physical play such as the bird's eggs stealing;<sup>22</sup> the boat stealing;<sup>23</sup> and ice skating.<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth constructs two different types of child's play in *The Prelude*: the natural, artless, physically exorbitant child's play in nature and the gaming child. These two versions of child's play, however, cannot be clearly distinguished and are often mutually dependent.

For the Romantic poets, play is a crucial component in the developmental process and is inseparable from the cultivation of a creative sensibility. The idea of play as creativity develops in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century as a form of resistance against modernisation, part of a quest for experience that will undo the abstraction and alienation of the work-culture divide. James, Bowen and DeLillo all differently engage with the Romantic idea of the writer-as-child and the novel as a game in order to conceptualise the relationship between writing and reading. This idea of the writer-as-child reverses the

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<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988) p. 294.

<sup>22</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799', p. 2, lines 310-350.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4, lines 81-130.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5, lines 150-185.

traditional concept of ascending to adulthood by positioning the child as the end point of the developmental process. Wordsworth illustrates this developmental reversal when discussing child's play in his 'Immortality Ode'; we see a 'six years' Darling ... 'mid work of his own hand ...

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,  
 Some fragment from his dream of human life,  
 Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;  
 A wedding or a festival,  
 A mourning or a funeral;  
 And this hath now his heart,  
 And unto this he frames his song:  
 Then will he fit his tongue  
 To dialogues of business, love, or strife;  
 But it will not be long  
 Ere this be thrown aside,  
 And with new joy and pride  
 The little Actor cons another part;  
 Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"  
 With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,  
 That Life brings with her in her equipage;  
 As if his whole vocation  
 Were endless imitation.<sup>25</sup>

Wordsworth here joins child's play to language to conceive of a *pure* mode of encountering the world. Both play and language are conceived of as imitative forms, however they are something more than the negative echoes of *The Prelude's* boy of Winander; they exist in a 'dialogue' with surrounding events which the boy of Winander ultimately fails to achieve. The child of the 'Immortality Ode', then, more closely resembles the child prodigy or 'dwarf man' portrayed in *The Prelude* in contrast to the "natural wisdom" of the boy of Winander.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', in *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995) p. 702, lines 90-107.

<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude* of 1805, p. 166, Book Fifth, lines 294-310.

These two conflicting images of childhood develop in a section of *The Prelude* in which the narrative expounds the instructive value of nature, when working alongside imaginative story-telling, to the growth of the artistic imagination. Nature as wordless materiality is aligned with poetry and storytelling and opposed to the knowledge of the child prodigy, a knowledge which is characterised as book-learning void of imaginative insight. In the boy of Winander scene, the missed encounter of reading provokes the estrangement of the hitherto reciprocal relationship between art and nature as the boy's poetic play is returned to the silent interval of nature. A poet or artist figure, the boy allows nature to enter 'unawares' into his mind; the poet is then encouraged to embrace this threshold experience of a liminal space in which nature and culture meet by replicating the obliviousness of innocence in order to, it seems, "channel" creative "inspiration" from his/her environment. This playful, precarious at-oneness with the environment has the effect of almost completely erasing the work of writing. A supposedly unmediated form of knowledge achieved through incorporating the innocence of the child, this is presented as a form of "natural" creativity which demands from the poet an unrelenting commitment to self-denial.

By becoming like a child Wordsworth believes that the writer is able to access the knowledge of childhood and the world-transforming qualities of this playful language. The child's elaborate designs are forms of play described here in the language of 'work' or 'vocation'. The child in the 'Immortality Ode' orientates his work to those life-defining emotional matters of love and death. Understanding these pivotal moments and mapping these into his fantasy world is a difficult task which the child undertakes through the art of play; the aesthetic dimension of the child's play-work, then, is upheld as the mode through which to best encounter the world. In response to the corruption of society, culture and language Wordsworth constructs this child 'philosopher' to suggest that culture should begin again from the perspective of the child. The 'Immortality Ode' reverses the developmental narrative; creative work in adult life must attempt to recollect childhood and in so doing

conjure a version of the potential space of play in order to reach towards a supposedly unmediated truth about experience of the world. For the Romantic poets the condition of childhood could not be recovered; instead, the adult poet is encouraged to reflect upon this and draw from memories of childhood. Creative work, then, for Wordsworth, is inseparable from nostalgia in that it requires a continuous turning back to childhood.<sup>27</sup>

The association of play and growth with nostalgia which pervades Romantic ideas of writing and creativity leads to a mode of thought in which play is used to support problematic narratives about history and progress. Providing an anthropological study of historical instances of play, Alexander Francis Chamberlain builds on William James's statements on play in 'The Principles of Psychology' to argue that play is a fundamental human instinct. In *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man* (1900) Chamberlain purports in a Rousseauian fashion that in the 'natural child' everything is true to appearance, nothing is 'hidden'; play he asserts is thus an exhibition of man's 'natural role'. Chamberlain's anxieties about the erasure of nationalised and racialised difference in an increasingly globalised modernity are revealed in his authoritative assertions on the qualities and character of play: 'plays' he asserts, 'more than anything else reveal national and racial character'.<sup>28</sup> Play, for Chamberlain, is a medium through which to map the developmental narrative of the individual onto society and culture.<sup>29</sup> By linking the supposedly natural behaviours of play with nationality he lends to nationality the essential, natural authority of an innately human characteristic instead of

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<sup>27</sup> For more on this see Linda Austin's 'Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy', *Studies in Romanticism*, 42:1 (Spring 2003) pp. 75-98.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Francis Chamberlain, *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1906) p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Responding to Franco Moretti's seminal work on the *Bildungsroman*, *The Way of the World*, Jed Esty suggests that Moretti has neglected the symbolic function of nationhood. His work *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*, analyses the tropes of 'frozen youth' and immaturity in modernist novels considering these tropes to disrupt narratives of progress or development which bind together myths of self-making and nation-building. Considering the globalisation of capital, Esty argues that the 'modernist figure of unseasonable youth ... unsettles the protocols of a genre that can no longer restrict the story of progress to the symbolic confines of the nation-state.' (*Unseasonable Youth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 26). His work demonstrates the ways in which modernism resists the simplistic mapping of individual development onto national development that he identifies in the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* and can also be seen in psychoanalytic, sociological and anthropological work at the turn of the twentieth century as demonstrated, for example, in the work of Chamberlain.

the slippery ontology of an environmental, culturally performed concept. Similarly to the Romantic poets, Chamberlain attempts to use games and play as historically stable reference points with which to make sense of the consequences of changing relations of capital in modernity for inherited, traditional modes of representing and comprehending identity (such as nationalism).

For Chamberlain, only the play of the ‘civilised’ child is culturally valuable; the inner-city child is excluded from play or their play is considered to be corrupt and is therefore devalued. Chamberlain details his hierarchical formula for the relationship between play and the development of ‘culture’ when he asserts:

The development of play from the indefinite to the definite, from the homogenous to the heterogeneous, follows the general law of psychical and physical evolution – from the lower animals to the higher, from the higher vertebrates to the human child, from the savage child to the civilized child.<sup>30</sup>

Chamberlain looks to what he considers to be ‘primitive’ or ‘childlike’ societies in order to lend ontological certainty and authenticity to his developmental narrative which positions Western society as the apex of civilisation. This is how play was being imagined at the turn of the twentieth century. The wild child in the form of Wordsworth’s boy of Winander, however, is not immediately assimilable into this anthropological narrative; instead, alone outside of ‘civilisation’, he occupies a sort of non-linguistic middle ground from which modernism draws influence.

Two contrasting strains of modernism, one prioritising difficulty and the other in response demanding play, both return to the boy of Winander but for different reasons.<sup>31</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> Chamberlain, *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> For modernism, Leonard Diepeveen argues, difficulty became a ‘legitimizing force’ (*The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. xi). He defines difficulty as ‘a barrier to what one normally expected to receive from a text, such as its logical meaning, its emotional expression, or its pleasure ... difficulty was the experience of having one’s desires for comprehension blocked’ (Ibid., p. x). Like Laura Frost, he draws attention to modernism’s mistrust of simplicity and easy pleasures. Frost proposes that the goal of modernism is ‘the redefinition of pleasure’ (*The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) p. 3). She demonstrates that ‘what would usually register as pleasure often becomes empty, dangerous, or even anhedonic.’ (Ibid., p. 2). Somatic pleasures are rejected and replaced with

her work on modernism's engagement with Romanticism which focuses on James Joyce's novels, Galia Benziman argues that external circumstances in Wordsworth's poetry 'persistently refuse to yield themselves to the child's idealizing gaze', yet Joyce, she proposes, values the child's unrelenting efforts to 'conquer' this external world.<sup>32</sup> James, Bowen and DeLillo are similarly concerned with a literary history of failed child's play. Bowen's work, however, represents an alternative strain of modernist literature to Joyce's, one which she perceives to be more closely allied to James's work. In *What Maisie Knew* stylistic difficulties put pressure on interpretative processes, and in so doing produce a reparative reading practice. Bowen's is a modernism which builds on the Jamesian child to reclaim the concept of play as a way of conceiving of the relationship between the writer and the reader. Writers such as Bowen and DeLillo, then, use the intergenerational aspect of play to disrupt unidirectional or teleological narratives of progress. In contrast to Chamberlain's privileging of the 'definite' play of the 'civilized child', both strains of modernist literature here identified reclaim the indefinite play that so fascinated Wordsworth: forms of imitative play which become language games, imaginative performance, and the transformation of found objects into playthings.

Wordsworth's 1799 *Prelude* takes the hazy rhythm and chronology of memory and play as its form; the movement and atmosphere of the poem as a whole recreates the utter absorption of play. This deliberate intervention of a precarious play into Wordsworth's poetics contrasts with Chamberlain's rigid formulas for the sophisticated, formative play of 'the civilized child'. In his influential modernist statement on play, Johan Huizinga distils the Romantic vision of the writer-as-child when he writes on poetry that it is a form of play

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those 'that require more ambitious analytical work.' (Ibid., p. 3). All three of the authors studied in this thesis have an uneasy relationship with modernism: James is considered here to anticipate modernism in some ways; Bowen's late work foreshadows postmodernism as she rejects certain aspects of modernism; and DeLillo's postmodern melancholia harks back to a fading modernism.

<sup>32</sup> Galia Benziman, 'The Child's Perspective: Hardy, Joyce, and the Redefinition of Childlike Romantic Sensibilities', *Joyce Studies Annual* (2013) pp. 151-171, p. 161.

which 'lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage and the seer belong, in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter. To understand poetry we must be capable of donning the child's soul like a magic cloak and forsaking man's wisdom for the child's.'<sup>33</sup> Huizinga participates in this Romantic vision, suggesting that to become the ideal reader or writer of poetry we must become like a child. It is through this becoming, he suggests, that we might access the child's knowledge. Though he does not detail exactly what this knowledge is, it seems that it grants a pre-social, pre-symbolic way of reading which provides access to the playful, aesthetic wonders of poetry, ordinarily lost to the adult reader. However, unlike the Romantic poets, play for Huizinga is a superior mode of experiencing because, in contrast to providing the poet with access to eternal truths and moral or ethical certainties, it enables new ways of encountering the world, modes of encounter which lie outside of moral structures, be they 'natural' or social.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to Huizinga, James does not perceive play as a way of being that might provide access to pre-social knowledge; he does, however, think about the ways in which the borders of the novel, when conceived of as a symbolic game, can create a form of moral relativity and a coherent stylistic epistemology. Bowen's *Eva Trout* then pushes this idea of the amorality of the game to its limit resulting in a dangerous act of child's play at the end of the novel. Child's play in *Eva Trout* is scripted by the material culture surrounding it and, although the child's final act is produced by the unreal, amoral structure of Eva's or the novel's game, child's play in relation to the force of material culture acts as the real which in the end cannot be contained by the game.

The complex, self-conscious engagement with child's play demonstrated in the work of James, Bowen and DeLillo runs against the dominant cultural fascination with play in the period; nevertheless, these writers are not immune to an idealising of play as a way of

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<sup>33</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949) p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

conceptualising creative work. Bill Brown argues that in the twentieth century ‘play serve[d] as a newly privileged mode of encountering, encoding, or effecting cultural change.’<sup>35</sup> This Romantic resurgence of the use of play as a model for conceiving of new modes of knowledge production which might initiate cultural change can be traced throughout the twentieth century as it develops and takes on different forms. For the Situationists, influenced by Huizinga’s work, play was ‘the core principle around which a new non-capitalist social order should be organised’.<sup>36</sup> They conceived of play as an excessive, and therefore structureless, activity that could not be contained and rationalised by social and cultural rules.<sup>37</sup>

Child’s play, for Theodor Adorno, similarly ruptures the routinised time of labour. In his essay on the subversive potential of children’s toys, Adorno upholds the time of child’s play as distinct from ‘interchangeable, abstract labor-time’.<sup>38</sup> He explains that adult engagement with toys is never free from an awareness of the position of toys in relations of capital: that these objects were manufactured by a person who needed to make a living. ‘Children’, he suggests, ‘are not so much ... subject to illusions of “captivating variety”, as still aware, in their spontaneous perception, of the contradiction between phenomenon and fungibility that the resigned adult no longer sees, and they shun it. Play is their defense.’<sup>39</sup> The ‘purposeless activity’ of the child at play exists, for Adorno, outside of the anticipatory time of exchange value through which capital functions; rather child’s play is fixed in the

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<sup>35</sup> Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas Smith, ‘Giving the Game Away: Play and Exchange in Situationism and Structuralism’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 13:4 (2005) pp. 421-434, p. 428.

<sup>37</sup> In his work on the relationship between play and ritual, Giorgio Agamben, working in sympathy with Situationist theory, also asserts the radical, transgressive potential of play, explaining that ‘play transforms structures into events’ (*Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007) p. 82). Agamben writes: ‘ritual fixes and structures the calendar; play, on the other hand, though we do not yet know how and why, changes and destroys it’ (Ibid., p. 77). Theoretical uses of play, of which Agamben’s is an example, turn towards play as a mysterious and potentially dangerous act which continues to raise more questions than it answers. Play’s relationship with time, for Agamben, is destructive, unpredictable and free.

<sup>38</sup> Theodor Adorno, ‘Toy Shop’, *Minima Moralia*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974) p. 227.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

present time of *experiencing* through its concern only in use value. The value of the child's knowledge, for Adorno, is in their 'spontaneous perception' of the tension between the materiality of the object and its interchangeability with other similar objects; it is play that enables the child to reject this dimension of the toy, concentrating solely on its use value. The child, then, can distinguish relations of capital and through play is capable of operating to the side of these relations. As with Bernstein and the Situationists, child's play for Adorno is a potential site of autonomy for the child; an unassimilable third space through which the child can resist the scripting of material objects and socioeconomic or cultural structures.

In a critique that could also be applied to Adorno's views on child's play, Douglas Smith posits that it was the Situationists' refusal to recognise that play in itself was not an activity that constituted an outside to relations of capital, and their consequent inability to acknowledge the ludic qualities that inhere in social structures, which meant that their theories of play were unsustainable and, indeed, failed to bring about the social change the movement desired. Smith aligns his argument with structuralist Emile Benveniste's critique of Huizinga 'that posited games and their play principle as a paradigm of the operation of structure itself.'<sup>40</sup> Brown similarly argues that play was co-opted by capital and commodified or instrumentalised into 'leisure time'.<sup>41</sup> He writes that

Political economy ... has preserved "play" as a site of transgressive possibility, where a non-productive human impulse seems to resist the ethic of progress and to reject the oppressive reproduction of relations that delimit human pleasure. But though play has a history of exceeding theoretical structure in (or as) the margin of unpredictability, the dynamics of capital have a history of converting any such excess into surplus value.<sup>42</sup>

Adorno's theory of child's play did not account for the emergence of the child as consumer and the accompanying return to the rigid organisation and routinisation of the child's leisure

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, 'Giving the Game Away', p. 429.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

time. Situating leisure in an earnest role at the centre of capitalist structure, William A. Gleason's *The Leisure Ethic* examines the late nineteenth-century emergence of a paradigm which replaces the established "work ethic" with an emphasis on leisure activities. He suggests that this new paradigm resulted from the rise in unskilled and unfulfilling factory work which provoked a growing body of working-class consumers to invest increased meaning in leisure-based identities.<sup>43</sup> Brown's work on play acknowledges Gleason's theory while asserting that, as well as workers themselves seeking meaning in leisure, capitalism *needed* workers to have leisure time in which to spend their earnings as a fundamental part of economic growth in a capitalist economics. He explains how these leisure activities were harnessed in order to channel the newly encouraged consumer desire of the workers into a series of regimented standardised forms.<sup>44</sup>

Recent work, such as that by Brian Edwards, revisits theories of play to extol their continued value to literature and critical endeavours. Edwards defines play as 'the principle of energy and difference which unsettles arrangements, promotes change and resists closure.'<sup>45</sup> Edwards's Derridean definition of play, however, participates in the Romantic idealisation of the aesthetic and political potential of play which is as I have just argued, limited in its usefulness. Terminology such as games and play can imply outmoded concepts of intentionality and a self-governing subject. Although I use the concept of child's play in my thesis, I join it to representations of specific games and toys in the novels I am analysing in order to avoid broad definitions of play too heavily dependent on terminology such as 'difference' and 'excess'. Alongside Winnicott's idea of the potential space, I use Deleuze's concept of the pure game and Freud's fort/da game in dialogue with the games of

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<sup>43</sup> William A. Gleason, *The Leisure Ethic: Work and Play in American Literature 1840-1940* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, p.6.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Edwards, *Theories of Play in Postmodern Fiction* (London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998) p. xiii.

Wordsworth's boy of Winander as my primary models for games and play through which to theorise instances of child's play in the novels of James, Bowen and DeLillo.

### 1.1.3 Pure Games

James, Bowen and DeLillo are all concerned with the roles of writer and reader in the literary encounter and as a result all, to some extent, think about the novel as a symbolic game in which the reader is complicit. Unable to continue to master historical reality through representation, modernist literature, as Roland Barthes explains, begins to create 'symbolic games';<sup>46</sup> instead of gesturing towards pre-existent or objective truths, novels create self-enclosed systems of reference that are ends in themselves. The act of delineating the space of the novel, then, becomes a play-process and child's play becomes a mode of both writing and reading; the indefinite, structureless space of play is figured as the ideal conceptual arena for the literary encounter. Huizinga attributes this figurative understanding of reading to the Romantics; he suggests that Romanticism could be described as 'a tendency to retrovert all emotional and aesthetic life to an idealized past where everything is blurred, structureless, charged with mystery and terror. The delineation of such an ideal space for thought is itself a play-process.'<sup>47</sup>

Edwards's version of play is developed in contrast to representations of the arena of the game as an autonomous reality. In line with this theory and responding to Huizinga's work, Roger Caillois writes that 'the game's domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a *pure space*. ... The game has no other but an intrinsic meaning.'<sup>48</sup> Caillois sets the

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<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Play of the Kaleidoscope', interview conducted by Jean-Louis Ézine published in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 1975, republished in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981) pp. 198-205, p. 204.

<sup>47</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 189.

<sup>48</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press, 1961) p. 7, emphasis added.

totalising limits of the game in stark contrast to the open-endedness of play. Play, then, remains true to its Winnicottian sense as a process, a space of experience set aside for the purpose of mediating between the self and its external environment, and the toy as a transitional object also participates in this model. The game, however, is a purely autonomous fictional space. James, Bowen and DeLillo find different ways for literature to create the impression of play, or encourage a playful reading practice, in order to transcend the limits of its own symbolic games. This raises the question of why modernist and postmodernist texts turn to child's play in particular in order to perform this transcendence in different ways. Using the idea of a game as a self-referential space, James, Bowen and DeLillo experiment with the Romantic possibility that child's play might redeem language from artifice and reunite it with truth through its positioning as a space of mediation between social structures and internal desires. Contending with a mix of fear and fascination, these authors set play in contrast to inward coiling language games which force language and literary knowledge to cohere within the self-contained space of the game, but risk losing the world to stylistic relativism.

James, Bowen and DeLillo all use the process of writing a novel to experiment with style as game. As Susan Sontag elucidates, 'If art is the supreme game which the will plays with itself, "style" consists of the set of rules by which this game is played. And the rules are always, finally, an artificial and arbitrary limit.'<sup>49</sup> Beyond these limits is the negative space that Wordsworth's boy of Winander is forced to confront and which leads to his death. To explore the ways in which stylistic limitations are presented to the reader as a part of a game, I employ Gilles Deleuze's theory of the doubled nature of games as at once innocent and deceitful to analyse games as models for reparative and suspicious modes of interpretation in novels by James and DeLillo.

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Sontag, 'On Style,' *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009) pp. 15-39, p. 33.

In response to the idea that power structures incorporate ludic qualities and the consequent loss of play as a radical alternative mode of experiencing outside of relations of capital, Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* builds on Caillois's idea of the 'pure', self-contained structure of the game to carve out a space for radical thought. 'The game', he writes, 'is explicitly taken as a model because it has implicit models which are not games: the moral model of the Good or the Best, the economic model of causes and effects, or of means and ends.'<sup>50</sup> He uses the games in Carroll's Alice books to construct his concept of the 'pure', 'ideal' or 'innocent game', explaining that these pure games have 'no precise rules, and they permit neither winner nor loser.'<sup>51</sup> The pure game, he suggests,

without rules, with neither winner nor loser, without responsibility, a game of innocence, a caucus-race, in which skill and chance are no longer distinguishable – seems to have no reality ... This game, which can only exist in thought and which has no other result the work of art, is also that by which thought and art are real and disturbing reality, morality, and the economy of the world.<sup>52</sup>

Deleuze wants to locate a genuinely anti-capitalist desire; he concludes that this desire can only exist in thought or art which creates a game space, a space which can appropriate production to itself – the production of knowledge must, then, be claimed within the space of the novel.<sup>53</sup> An artwork or novel must become what Deleuze terms a 'pure game', set up in contrast to what he identifies as the State game-system, a deceitful game which produces suspicious or paranoid reading practices. Designing maps of desire, the pure game illustrates the processes by which desire is determined and produced or, indeed, comes into being, through organisations of power; the pure game then imagines other potential forms or

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<sup>50</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: The Athlone Press, 1990) p. 59.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>53</sup> This process of appropriating production is what he suggests capital does and is how, he believes, capital is able to sustain itself; constantly co-opting its outside into itself. For this reason, he calls capital a 'body without organs'; a structure which does not itself produce but *appropriates* production making labour invisible. Workers, in line with Marxist terminology in which he founds his theories, are in this instance the organs—the matter made invisible or unreadable through the illusion that capital creates capital. Art then, he suggests must itself become a body without organs.

trajectories that this desire might take. This pure game delineates a space of thought which encourages a particular version of innocent literary knowledge, an innocence disentangled from pre-existing moral frameworks. The position of the wild child in relation to language works in a similar mode. The hootings of Wordsworth's boy of Winander occupy the cusp of a pure game; the impossible innocence of his game marks its incapacity to exist in the world, and as such it destroys itself when forced to confront the lack of external response.

James and DeLillo test the possibility of transforming the novel into a pure game that, by orchestrating a self-contained epistemological and aesthetic economy, might form a new version of literary knowledge with which to interrupt the moral models imposed upon writing and reading from traditional literary or social structures. I demonstrate that these authors achieve varying levels of success with their pure games and explore how their attempts and failures generate forward-looking ways of conceiving of the roles of writer and reader. At points when these pure games fail to maintain their borders, child's play for these writers emerges as a mode of antagonism towards existing formal and critical positions which might allow for the formation of critical voice in the novel, a voice that for Deleuze is unachievable due to its inseparability from the paranoid model of duplicitous State games.

In work on the child's relationship with his/her cultural environment, Walter Benjamin illuminates this tension between child's play and pure games. He explains that

the perceptual world of the child is influenced at every point by the traces of the older generation, and has to take issue with them. The same applies to the child's play activities. It is impossible to construct them as dwelling in a fantasy realm, a fairy-tale land of pure childhood or pure art.<sup>54</sup>

For Benjamin, a child's playful interactions with objects are expressions of his/her relationship with culture and become a way of working out his/her antagonisms with that

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<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Toys and Play: Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work' in *Selected Writings Vol. 2 1927-1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999) pp. 117-122, p. 118.

culture. Child's play, he explains cannot be placed in the realm of timeless Romanticism. Toys, by extension, cannot be made analogous with 'pure art' objects which might exist for their own sake. In line with this mode of thought, Bowen in particular focuses on toys as forms of material culture which, in some sense, determine child's play. DeLillo's novels, however, probe more forcefully the tensions between toys and pure games to reveal the relations of capital underlying imaginative work which might resemble child's play, and the marketised forms it must eventually adopt.

#### 1.1.4 Toys in Time

The toy exists as a 'site of conflict'<sup>55</sup> and as such is positioned by James, Bowen and DeLillo in stark contrast to the pure game. In novels by Bowen and DeLillo the toy even provokes instability in the plot or undermines lines of fiction. These toys decentre our reading practices by directing our attention to objects lingering at the margins of the plot. Charged with significance, toys are held in an interdependent relationship with characters. At points they actively determine the trajectory of the plot, working in tension with child's play to rupture the value systems of the modernist novel that privilege consciousness and subjectivity.

This ability of toys to interrupt a subjective experience of narrative temporality is drawn from the shifts in the uses and meanings (or meaningfulness) of toys as they are manifested in a way that sets them apart from the time in which they exist; as a result of this dislocation toys are often theorised as also disrupting historical time. In his discussion of the history of toys, games and pastimes, Ariès proposes that when objects with ritualistic significance lose their religious symbolism and become profane they are adopted into children's games. Children's games, Ariès explains, then act as the 'repository of collective

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

demonstrations which were henceforth abandoned by adult society and deconsecrated.<sup>56</sup> In line with this work, Agamben conceives of play and ritual as in some sense inseparable, suggesting that it is in the toy that we can ‘grasp the temporality of history’. ‘Play’, he writes ‘thereby preserves profane objects and behaviour that have ceased to exist’ elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Toys and games, then, both reify outmoded behaviours or traditions and subvert them by removing them from their original context. At the climax of *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot rehearses a series of mantras, one of which is ‘London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down’.<sup>58</sup> First recorded in the late nineteenth century and common in both the U.S. and the U.K. the exact history of this well-known nursery rhyme or singing game is unclear and as a result a series of myths cluster around it; children, however, repeat the rhyme uninterested in the historical event it references.<sup>59</sup> The repetitive pattern of the rhyme is divorced from its historical reference points and is rehearsed again in Eliot’s poem as a ‘fragment’ of history. Describing speech that is duplicitous and vacuous in equal measure in *What Maisie Knew*, James, similarly, uses the metaphor ‘as empty as a chorus in a children’s game’.<sup>60</sup> DeLillo’s novels explore the ways in which toys and games persist, emptied of their history, as symbols that come to take on new meaning. Ariès illuminates this function of the toy using the example of the toy windmill. He states: ‘while the windmill has long ago disappeared from our countryside, the child’s windmill is still on sale in toyshops and market or fair-ground stalls.’ ‘Children’, he concludes, ‘form the most conservative of human societies.’<sup>61</sup> I analyse representations of the toy windmill in DeLillo’s *Underworld*, tracing representations of this toy back to Wordsworth’s *Prelude* to consider its symbolic significance.

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<sup>56</sup> Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 69.

<sup>57</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 79.

<sup>58</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Michael North (ed.) (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001) p. 19, line 426.

<sup>59</sup> Iona and Peter Opie analyse the rhyme and speculate about its origins in *The Singing Game* ((Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) pp. 61-72).

<sup>60</sup> Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) p. 96.

<sup>61</sup> Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 68.

Examining the ways in which toys retain the past and in so doing contribute to a coherent and lasting culture, Winnicott argues that this relationship with past behaviours or practices is not just unidirectional. In his work on the toy as a ‘transitional object’, Winnicott explains that when using the word “culture” he is ‘thinking of the inherited tradition. I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw if we have somewhere to put what we find.’<sup>62</sup> He suggests that we supply and benefit from culture through the intermediate or potential space of play which mediates subjective and objective realities. ‘It is these cultural experiences’, he writes, ‘that provide the continuity in the human race that transcends personal experience.’<sup>63</sup> Culture for Winnicott is a potential space which we furnish through play. Winnicott’s idea of culture as an interactive space of play which both shapes behaviours and is shaped by them works to illuminate Deleuze’s pure game, which is instead a method for resisting the determining force of culture through adopting its form whilst refusing its rules from the inside. Winnicott’s theory of the transitional object has also informed my reading of Bernstein’s argument that ‘Literary and visual culture ... combine

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<sup>62</sup> D. W. Winnicott, ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’, *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces*, Peter L. Rudnytsky (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp. 3-13, p. 7. In *Playing and Reality* Winnicott defines the ‘transitional object’ in more detail as an object which marks an ‘intermediate area of experiencing’ in between the external world and the child’s understanding of its own interiority (*Playing and Reality*, p. 2). ‘It is not the object of course that is transitional’ he explains, ‘The object represents the infant’s transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate’ (Ibid., p. 17). In order to explore what he describes as ‘the fusion or defusion of the subjective object and the object objectively perceived,’ (Ibid., p. 44) he analyses the way the child will gather objects into his/her intermediate space of play and relates this to an experience of interacting with a culture (Ibid., p. 60). Winnicott’s definition of culture overlaps with Raymond Williams’s definition of culture as a process of human evolution as well as his ‘social’ definition of culture in which culture is ‘a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour.’ (‘The Analysis of Culture’, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, John Storey (ed.) (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998) pp. 48-57, p. 48). Winnicott’s definition differs from Williams’s, however, as Williams argues that culture must be analysed as a whole by examining intellectual and imaginative work as part of a process of human evolution in a way that considers the ‘relationships between elements in a whole way of life’ (Ibid., p. 52). Crucially, Williams also proposes the idea of ‘selective tradition’ in which the survival of particular cultural material is governed by the different interests (for example class interests) of new periods (Ibid., p. 55); whereas Winnicott’s definition of culture here appears to suggest that the universality of play provides everyone the opportunity to contribute and draw from culture in an unproblematic way.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

with material culture (dolls) to script performances'<sup>64</sup> and that these scripts are then adapted through play. Aligning with this theory but departing from the idea of the relative autonomy of play, I consider the ways in which child's play in the novels of James, Bowen and DeLillo is often portrayed as limited in its capacity to disrupt these scripted performances.

The Romantic fear that a post-lapsarian culture has lost the capacity for play persists into modernist literature; indeed, even poststructuralist theory looks to games in order to conceive of a genuinely autonomous space of thought. Postmodernism embraces play in the form of irony and pastiche; however, it can never fully extricate these forms of playful meaning from the history of theoretical uses of play: the hope that play might provide radical ways of reading. Modernist and postmodernist writers alike are attracted by the metacritical potential of games and toys. This thesis will examine the ways in which James uses play to produce a specific version of literary knowledge as a mode of reading complicit in the novel's stylistic performances. Bowen similarly experiments with play as a way to conceive of the work of writing; her final novel, *Eva Trout*, is concerned with whether play can ever be considered subversive or whether structures formed around relations of capital always already subsume the excess experiences of the writer-child at play. DeLillo's novels more overtly engage with this theoretical history of play; his melancholic and self-mocking style finds itself as it at once laments the loss of belief in the radical capacity of play and satirises the aestheticisation of the labour of writing which occurs in the politicisation of play. The work of these three authors, then, takes us throughout twentieth-century changes in perspectives of child's play and its significance for the literary encounter.

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<sup>64</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, p. 28.

## 1.2 From Innocent to Deceitful Child

The concept of childhood innocence is defined and valued differently in the work of James, Bowen and DeLillo. Children in the work of these authors experience the oppressive weight of the social expectation of their innocence, their lack of knowledge, artifice or sexuality, and are queered by it;<sup>65</sup> nevertheless, child's play performances in the novels included in this study also queer our conception of innocence. Examining representations of these play performances in literature, my intervention in childhood studies follows on from Bernstein's identification of the struggle within the field to 'narrate the processes by which children and childhood give body to each other'. 'The act of embodiment', she writes, 'is a performance.'<sup>66</sup> The novels I am analysing take a close look at their own relationship with performances of childhood innocence. In novels by James and Bowen, children engage with their presumed innocence creatively as camouflage through which to substantiate their selfhood or, indeed, as a method of survival. In addition, James, Bowen and DeLillo rethink innocence in order to make it a potentially workable concept for conceiving of a particular version of literary knowledge. In work by these writers, innocence is not just a lack of artifice but acts as a potential way to apprehend the negative space of fiction. This writerly turn to innocence as a mode through which to characterise the scene of encountering a novel is often figured, either consciously or unconsciously, in tension with the way children in these novels are themselves embodying and queering innocence. This confrontation with the impossibility of certain versions of childhood innocence continually problematises the logic of the Romantic

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<sup>65</sup> As a starting point my analysis uses Kathryn Bond Stockton's assertion that 'Innocence is queerer than we ever thought it could be' (*The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) p. 5). She demonstrates the ways in which the 'ghostly gay child' illuminates issues of childhood queerness more broadly and uses the "the queer child" to conceive of childhood experiences of growth that are delayed or queered by an inability to identify with the structure provided in conventional growth narratives (Ibid., p. 2), for example 'the child queered by innocence' (Ibid., p. 8).

<sup>66</sup> Bernstein, *Radical Innocence*, p. 22.

child which maintains, through figures such as the boy of Winander, that the most innocent child is the dead child.

There is a significant amount of scholarship around what work the Romantic child is doing as the dominant paradigm determining representations of childhood in nineteenth-century literature and culture.<sup>67</sup> Building on this work, and beginning with James's *What Maisie Knew*, the primary concern of my research is to scrutinise what versions of the Romantic child still exist in twentieth-century literature and theory. In work on the Jamesian child, Maeve Pearson suggests that the Romantic child was unable to continue to 'carry the burden of social regeneration'.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, despite this loss of symbolic purpose, remnants of the Romantic child still persist in a hollow but powerful form and, indeed, symbolise in other ways.

One current debate around childhood is framed by the tension between the child consumer and the Romantic child. Discourse around childhood of late demonstrates an increased focus on childhood autonomy, a perspective which tends to fuse adulthood and childhood, in contrast to the separation of childhood from adulthood maintained by what remains of a nineteenth-century view of the Romantic child.<sup>69</sup> Intervening in this debate, this thesis probes the assumptions on both sides and argues the case for a rereading of what work the Romantic child is doing on both sides of this debate. I propose that we are forced to divide childhood up into different categories, for example the wild child or the knowing child

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<sup>67</sup> Much of this work has been outlined in the above section 'Theoretical Concepts'; work by Plotz, Rowland, Shuttleworth and Higonnet has been central to my thinking on the Romantic conception of the child as innocent and separate from adulthood, and how this became the dominant paradigm in discourses around childhood in the nineteenth century.

<sup>68</sup> Maeve Pearson, 'Re-exposing the Jamesian Child: The Paradox of Children's Privacy', *HJR*, 28:2 (spring 2007) pp. 101-119, p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> The child as consumer, although considered by some scholars (such as Cunningham) to collapse the distance between adult and child through attributing autonomy to the child, actually constructs the child as a separate market and in so doing further delineates "the child". For more detail on this debate see Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2011) and Henry Giroux's *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children* (New York: Palgrave, 2000). This thesis does not consider habits of consumption to be an unproblematic expression of autonomy; any discussion of agency is instead underpinned by Deleuze's work on the ways in which markets make available certain options at certain times, and on the impossibility of locating the moment of agency due to desire's implicit and complicit relationship with capital and organisations of power.

– both of which are pre-existing components of the Romantic child – in order to attempt to preserve an outmoded concept of childhood. Thinking about the performativity of childhood through the ways in which it is represented in literature provides a way for us to move forward out of the constraining assumptions of this debate. I demonstrate that a series of irresolvable yet productive tensions define the Romantic child image and that it is the capacity of the concept of childhood to force these competing demands to coalesce into a single image which means that a version of Romanticism has been able to persist in our understanding of childhood.

The Romantic child is at once enigmatic and transparently available for interpretation; natural and transcendental; erotic and innocent; the threat of illusion and the promise of a return to the truth<sup>70</sup>; redemption and obsolescence, or the continuation of tradition and the possibility of radical change. This thesis will unpack these paradoxes in more detail, but here I will briefly explore some of these tensions in order to adumbrate the existing scholarship on Romantic childhood. The natural-transcendental child is defined as a child of intense physical awareness who is also in possession of a transcendental mind capable of surpassing its environment. John T. Heirs argues that a reading of Wordsworth's poetical children as simple, passive, naturally dependent beings is deeply flawed. Against this reading he posits the child's 'transcendental mind': the child's innate imaginative powers for unification of the mutable natural world into an eternal morality.<sup>71</sup> He sets the child's transcendental mind against the view of the child as powerlessly shaped by his/her environment. The transcendental mind of the child in Wordsworth's poetry, for Heirs, transforms the child from a passive observer into active agent. However, this idealisation of the transcendental mind, while providing the child with some authority, cements the

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<sup>70</sup> For more on this paradox in particular see Ellen Pifer's *Demon or Doll: Images of Childhood in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> John T. Heirs, 'Wordsworth's Vision of Childhood: A Call for Reexamination,' *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 34:3 (May 1969) pp. 8-10.

separation of the child from his/her surrounding environment and preserves this unsocialised child as a mythical innocent. For Wordsworth, then, passivity and innocence are not the mutually dependent concepts they are characterised as in the nineteenth century. Although the “natural” or “wild child” similarly embodies a form of social innocence, the innocence of the transcendental child, as the philosophical and moral superior to an adult mentality, is founded in the denial of the intensity of desiring, embodied experience that is permitted to the wild child who is ‘stood alone/ A naked savage in the thunder-shower’.<sup>72</sup> This Enlightenment wild child who occupies the disappearing space between nature and culture, and in so doing exposes, for Wordsworth, the distance between these two spaces, becomes in DeLillo’s work a “postmodern wild child” emerging, instead, from within the social-symbolic order as linguistically impaired.<sup>73</sup> This postmodern wild child produces a new version of innocence which does not restore the self to a mode of simple being and no longer constructs the real as the opposite of language; this is an innocence which, nevertheless, still participates in the Romantic vision of the wild child as the route to a truthful and ethical relationship with language.

The transcendental child is a solipsistic isolated individualist: an image of the power of the individual mind over nature. Emphasis on the child’s transcendental mind alone engineers an ideal of a child who embodies child-like qualities, such as innocence, regardless of their cultural environment, as Bernstein explains when she writes: ‘Sentimental childlike innocence manifested through performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender and ... race.’<sup>74</sup> This transcendental child becomes in modernist literature the knowing or enigmatic child; I analyse this version of the child in order to explore the value of forms of childhood knowing and not knowing in the work of James, Bowen and DeLillo. Pearson

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<sup>72</sup> Wordsworth, ‘The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799’, p. 1, line 26.

<sup>73</sup> For more work on this see James Berger’s ‘Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo and Turns against Language’, *PMLA*, 120:2 (March 2005) pp. 341-361.

<sup>74</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, p. 6

suggests, for example, that 'James's "passion for nostalgia" in [his] late works represents an attempt to restore a certain transcendence to childhood'.<sup>75</sup> Bowen's children, however, are tied down to the games of surrounding adults, and the material culture which determines their character and behaviour.

The natural-transcendental child is simultaneously feral savage and civilised philosopher; this image, then, generates a companion image of the erotic innocent by paradoxically being both intensely physical and simultaneously beyond, and thus better than, the desires of the physical. The child's intense physicality leads to intense transcendence; in scenes from *The Prelude* such as the bird's egg stealing and ice-skating, Wordsworth demonstrates this by joining passionate corporeal satisfaction to transcendent appreciation of nature. Since the publication of James Kincaid's controversial works *Child-Loving* (1992) and *Erotic Innocence* (1998), this image of the erotic innocent has been explored by many critics as an irresolvable tension at the core of the Romantic child image. Higonnet identifies this 'paradoxical desirability of innocence' in the nineteenth and twentieth-century photographic fascination with the child body, which, she purports, cannot be considered 'as a simple perversion of the Romantic ideal, but rather seems to be an intensification of it'.<sup>76</sup> The erotic innocent is the image of the Romantic child at its most intense; the Romantic child finds itself in this image of irresolvable tension and it is this ambiguous tension that comes to define the Romantic child. The paradoxical natural-transcendental child is undeniably reflected in this paradox of the erotic innocent. Kevin Ohi argues that the child's embodiment of innocence allows adult society to maintain the fantasy of a transcendental mind beyond the desires of the physical; this transcendental mind then attests to a pure autonomous origin, 'uncorrupted by commerce with its outside'.<sup>77</sup> The child's knowledge,

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<sup>75</sup> Pearson, 'Re-exposing the Jamesian Child', p. 116

<sup>76</sup> Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, p. 126.

<sup>77</sup> Kevin Ohi, *Innocence and Rapture: The Erotic Child in Pater, Wilde, James, and Nabokov* (New York: Palgrave, 2005) p. 6.

then, is the knowledge of a pure essential inside; an inside not determined by socially constructed desires. It is the impulse to capture this child's knowledge in the form of the novel which leads to experiments in constructing pure games, games that might produce a version of knowledge which arises from inside the novel itself.

Sigmund Freud's investigations into what the child knows and does not know formed his substantial contribution to extinguishing the myth of sexual innocence in childhoods of the twentieth century. Proving that the child is not innocent of sexual instincts or physically motivated desires, Freud's revelations could have spelled ruination for the erotic innocent. The twentieth century, nevertheless, experienced a continuation and even intensification of the erotic innocent image; the sexual instinct of infancy and early childhood once confirmed is then exonerated in later childhood as lost through repression.<sup>78</sup> This socially engineered innocence is still perceived as innocence and its appeal is, therefore, intensified in its capacity to attest to a repressed, authentic, pure and 'polymorphously perverse' sexual nature concealed by the pressure of socioeconomic factors which are yoked to culturally conditioned versions of sexual normativity. The child then is simultaneously innocent and erotic by its very "nature".

Though sexual experiences are not explicitly explored as a dimension of childhood experience in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the poem maps the mutability and intensity of childhood desires; as a result, criticism of the autobiographical mode of the poem has enjoyed a proliferation of Freudian readings which uncover the poem's repressed sexual forms.<sup>79</sup> It is the tension generated between the polymorphous perversity in the mentality of Wordsworth's 'naked savage' – intimate and arresting descriptions of the physical vitality of

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<sup>78</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and other works*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991) pp. 39-171, p. 94.

<sup>79</sup> For more on this see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805): Books Nine to Thirteen', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 23:3 (fall 1981) pp. 324-360, and Mark Edmundson's *Towards Reading Freud: Self-creation in Milton, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Sigmund Freud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

childhood experience – and the contrasting transcendence of desire in Wordsworth’s “philosopher child,” that formulates the lasting paradoxical image of the erotic innocent and encourages readings of the poem’s unconscious sexual instincts and fantasies. This tension between the two images of childhood plays out in Book Fifth of *The Prelude* between the ‘dwarf man’ or child prodigy and the boy of Winander; the one dead, frozen in childhood and immortalised in the poem, due to his impossibly intense imaginative instincts, and the other divorced from these instincts in his attachment to ‘civilised’, linguistic forms of knowledge. The voice of the poet appears desperate in his desire to force these two images coalesce through his narrative and in so doing to co-opt the knowledge of these two child figures.

In Sally Shuttleworth’s significant work on the mind of the child she investigates the nineteenth-century critique of Romanticism’s focus on imaginative play, and the century’s attempt to distance itself from the darker aspects of Romantic childhood, its ‘troubled pleasures’.<sup>80</sup> Shuttleworth discusses how the childhood fantasy of enacting a role different to the one assigned by nature became the greatest modern sin.<sup>81</sup> Gaull’s work on Romanticism similarly argues that the purpose of Romantic poetry was ‘to enfranchise the imagination, raising it from a faculty associated with fantasy, falsehood, even insanity to one that could ... mediate between the known and the unknown ... [and] formulate responses to change.’<sup>82</sup> Play, for the Romantic poets, is the imaginative arena in which this mediation takes place. The nineteenth century, however, saw a return to the idea of imaginative child’s play as deceitful, not an expression of childhood innocence but a threat to that innocence. This conservative perspective on the Romantic child’s play is demonstrated in G. Stanley Hall’s ‘Children’s Lies’ (1890) in which he details the different versions of lying he has identified

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<sup>80</sup> Wordsworth, ‘The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799’, p. 3, line 91.

<sup>81</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 83.

<sup>82</sup> Gaull, *English Romanticism*, p. 374

and recommends the curtailment of imaginative play in childhood to prevent the impulse to lie.<sup>83</sup> Hall's view of imaginative play holds similarities with the children in Richard Rothwell's *Novitiate Mendicants* (1837).



Figure 2: Richard Rothwell, *Novitiate Mendicants*, 1837.

Although ambiguous, the children in the painting do appear to be playing at begging rather than begging out of necessity as the title of the painting suggests. The girl's plea for adult attention is also heavily eroticised as she holds her hand to her mouth and slightly lifts her tattered skirt, a portrayal that seems to imply a warning to the adult viewer to resist the seductive nature of innocence. This form of child's play depicts anything but the simplicity

<sup>83</sup> G. Stanley Hall, 'Children's Lies', *The Pedagogical Seminary*, 1:2 (1891) pp. 211-218, p. 215.

and transparency expected of children in the period. Indeed, in suggesting that the child's innocence is the privilege of middle class children not to be trusted in others, it demonstrates adult suspicion towards the performative nature of childhood innocence.

Bernstein asserts that 'To be innocent was to be innocent of something, to achieve obliviousness';<sup>84</sup> the downfall of the children in *Novitiate Mendicants* is, from Rothwell's perspective, that they are unable to remain oblivious of their needs, that they are, in fact, aware of their socioeconomic status and the desirability of their innocence as the only available means by which to improve that status. *What Maisie Knew* overtly engages with the social and cultural obsession with what the child knows or does not know and demonstrates the pressure of the demand for the child to become transparently available. James engages with this idea of imaginative child's play as deceitful to reclaim the aesthetic value of deceit, making it into a poetics which the child interacts with to develop a necessarily artful mode of reading. Maisie is, then, able to harness the expectation of her transparency to privately cultivate a sense of self. In order to preserve her sense of self, and in an attempt to redeem the adults surrounding her, Maisie joins with the novel's poetics of deceit to perform the obliviousness demanded of her.

In contrast to this reading of *What Maisie Knew*, considered here to be a proto-modernist novel, Daniela Caselli argues of the modernist novel that the continuous time of thought is broken by the child's innocent expressions; their lack of 'dishonesty' or 'distortion' interrupting the subjectivity of modernist narratives.<sup>85</sup> Revising the Romantic child in a different way to James's Maisie, the child of modernism represents a dissimilar kind of truth in that it 'stands', Caselli writes, 'for things happening rather than being recounted'. The opposite of transcendental, Caselli suggests that the child in modernism acts as the

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<sup>84</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> Daniela Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory: Childhood, Affect, Critical Thought', *Feminist Theory*, 11:3 (2010) pp. 241-254, p. 242.

unnarratable force of realism or as matter itself.<sup>86</sup> Whilst engaging with this function, the child's relationship with materiality in the work of Bowen and DeLillo is more complex, as adults look to children to perform a doomed transcendence and children struggle against the forces of their material environment.

This thesis contributes to work by queer and feminist theorists that has attempted to reconceptualise childhood and wrest it away from its Romantic associations which impose restrictive versions of innocence and passivity. My thinking has been informed by Steven Bruhm's and Natasha Hurley's idea of queerness as inherent to the condition of childhood; Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of being 'queered by innocence' and 'growing sideways' in response to being unable to identify with normative developmental narratives and experiencing them as oppressive as a result; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas of 'queer performativity', shame and reparative reading in *Touching Feeling*; Kevin Ohi's work critique of the ideal of childhood innocence; and Lee Edelman's work on queerness and the death drive as antithetical to the futurity symbolised by childhood.<sup>87</sup> The novels analysed in this thesis all lend themselves to a reading supported by this queer theoretical framework as they all differently participate in formal and figurative experiments with queer developmental narratives. The queer children and non-normative chronologies depicted in the fiction of James, Bowen and DeLillo expose the interaction of Romantic myths with modern cultural systems, whilst proposing new models of knowledge and communication which bridge the gap between "adult" and "child" experience. Imaginative child's play then provides the space to express many different identities and test other potential growth narratives or 'sideways

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>87</sup> Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (eds.), 'Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children', *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) pp. ix-xxxviii, p. x. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, p. 8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) p. 61. Kevin Ohi, *Innocence and Rapture*, p. 6. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004) p. 4.

growth’;<sup>88</sup> not just individual growth narratives but also ideas of history and narratives of social or cultural progress.

This version of child’s play, attuned to its queerness, might remove it from Edelman’s critique of the relationship between “the child” and temporality.<sup>89</sup> Edelman argues that we have been unable to conceive of a future without the child, and that as a result of this the child as a product of heteronormative reproduction has come to symbolise not just progress but the concept of futurity itself.<sup>90</sup> This teleological narrative around childhood, tied to what the child symbolises, is in tension with Freud’s Romantic theory that completion lies behind us. This tension between nostalgia and futurity embodied in the figure of the child at play and in the material culture surrounding childhood, begs the question: is there a way to view children as children that is not tied to the Romantic child image, or are they now always, instead, viewed through the lens of the adults they are to become? I propose that thinking about childhood as determined by the material culture surrounding it enables us to conceive of childhood as a site of conflict between the past and the future, not as a duration defined by the concept of futurity. If, as Edelman suggests, we cannot envisage a future without the figure of the child then what happens to the figure of the child in a post-apocalyptic, “end of history” landscape?<sup>91</sup> Does this landscape open up space for the figure of the child to symbolise states or temporalities other than future? Or does DeLillo in particular use the figure of the child in a post-apocalyptic landscape to generate hope that there is a future?

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<sup>88</sup> Stockton, *The Queer Child*, p. 11.

<sup>89</sup> In response to Edelman’s theory of the child as the anti-queer, Bruhm and Hurley use Alice as an example of the focus on futurity actually allowing the child’s queerness as long as it can be rationalised as a series of childish mistakes abandoned en route to the desired version of adulthood. The child’s queerness, they argue, ‘inheres instead in innocence run amok.’ (Bruhm and Hurley (eds.), *Curiouser*, p. xiv).

<sup>90</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> I consider Francis Fukuyama’s thesis on “the end of history” in relation to DeLillo’s *Underworld*, but do not reproduce this phrase uncritically. It is useful here for thinking about how, in *Underworld*, the child continues to reconfigure historical time even when confronted with these narratives; however, the idea of “the end of history” obscures the fact that capitalism emerged in very specific historical conditions and was not the product of an inevitable progression.

Indeed, is any identifiable resurgence of the Romantic child linked in part to this post-apocalyptic desire for futurity?

Hugh Cunningham's survey of the history of childhood which stretches across five centuries concludes that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, society still accords significance to childhood; however, he suggests that due to the rise of the child as consumer, individuals doubt the possibility of preserving the integrity of childhood. 'Invasions threaten from every quarter,' he writes, 'and childhood, so it is argued, can no longer survive. In consequence children themselves become alien creatures, a threat to civilization rather than its hope and potential survival.'<sup>92</sup> As children become ferocious, insatiable consumers, this thesis will consider the shift towards a view that children are dangerous and are in fact no longer children at all. This new danger is different in nature to that of the Enlightenment wild child whose dangerousness is joined to his/her position outside of language, law, and a sense of normative moral society. A newly dangerous child, embedded within capitalism, also provokes its opposite, an innocent child under threat from his/her exposure to the adult world of market-based decision making and leads to a resurgence of representations of Romantic childhood. This contemporary environment reproduces the tension between the image of the child as future and the ways in which the child's deathly play represents either a dangerous future or no future at all. Child's play in the work of James, Bowen and DeLillo is never far from death and destruction; like the Romantic child this death is not always his/her own but is, instead, an omen of structural, social or cultural deaths.

While critiquing the Romantic child, queer theory reinvests in the imaginative capacities of the child. The idea of the writer-as-child in relation to the queerness of child's play has the potential to disrupt novelistic, and indeed social, teleological developmental narratives, narratives which often end the child's growth in heteronormative reproductivity. Problematising the ways in which we theorise the child and critiquing the oppressive effects

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<sup>92</sup> Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p. 179.

of these theorisations, queer theory by Stockton and Bruhm and Hurley, then makes the child signify in different ways, often as symbolic of alternative modes of negotiating, or subverting, restrictive external structures.<sup>93</sup> Following this line of inquiry, I explore what the theory of the writer-as-child can provide for James, Bowen and DeLillo considering Rose's work on the impossibility of writing, delimiting or theorising the child. Queer theory has arguably moved us beyond this impasse and into other productive, yet in some ways potentially problematic, theoretical territory. The tradition of thinking about the writer as a child fixes child's play as the primary arena of creative activity in a way that apparently defies theorisation in its immediacy and affectivity and in so doing actually conceals problematic notions of an "alternative", autonomous subjectivity. Working through this problem, I build on Caselli's work in order to analyse and develop the writer-as-child image. Caselli situates childhood in the realm of affect and suggests that affect is 'a way of theorising what apparently defies narration, it also rehearses past feminist debates about experience: affect and experience share the claim to be beyond critical analysis – they can be felt but not questioned.'<sup>94</sup> She explains that 'Like affect, childhood seduces us into thinking we may do without perspective, while we were holding one all along'.<sup>95</sup> Guarding against this I use the writer-as-child image to think about child's play, instead, in the way that Caselli suggests of childhood, that it is 'what emerges from the hard labour of framing, thinking about the way we think.'<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Stockton's work on the child uses narratives of the 'ghostly gay child' to imagine queer modes of resistance to restrictive heteronormative models for growth (*The Queer Child*, p. 2). Bruhm and Hurley themselves summarise this problem with a turn to the child's queerness when they state that 'To unearth the queer child of narrative may well be to make the child as utopian as do discussions of childhood innocence, but in doing so, it complicates the story of innocence itself as a foundational narrative.' (Bruhm and Hurley, *Curiouser*, p. xxxiv).

<sup>94</sup> Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', pp. 250-251.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

### 1.3 Methodology

Often considered sentimental or vain indulgence due to its relationship with autobiography and personal experience childhood as a thematic area of study has historically been neglected or even dismissed in literary criticism. As Caselli notes, childhood in its presumed immediacy is often not read or theorised, or as Rose suggests can, indeed, be over-theorised purely because of its silence; the question for childhood studies, then, is where do we go from here? Childhood and child's play in particular are, I contend, the near-invisible arenas within which crucial debates about the future of culture often unfold and as such demand closer analysis.

The scope of this thesis is intentionally broad in order to cover an array of different theories of child's play, toys and games. I have narrowed the purview of this thesis by focusing on representations of child's play in the work of three authors, James, Bowen and DeLillo, whose novels take me from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. It is my argument that the twentieth century was a period of significant change in the way that childhood was theorised and represented. This thesis demonstrates these shifts, not through a literary survey, but through detailed analysis of novels which engage overtly with changes in theories of play as a way of thinking about the relationship between creative work, the formal space of the novel and the position of the reader. A shared conceptual interest in child's play brings into conversation the chronologically distant works of the authors included in this study. Structured as a study of a particular modality of childhood that I have identified as beginning with James's work and as continuing in a variety of forms into contemporary fictional representations of childhood, this thesis compares otherwise seemingly contrasting texts. This modality represents child's play in relation to writerly or interpretative work. Tracing this modality, then, further illuminates work by these authors by creating encounters between authors who are rarely brought together, such as James and DeLillo.

None of the authors included in this study fit comfortably into the frameworks of modernism or postmodernism. For this reason, the works of these authors sit outside of our usual methods for approaching a text. They all engage with the Romantic image of the child as a social and cultural outsider to understand their writerly position. At a remove from the literary modes of their period, novels by James, Bowen and DeLillo resist critical mastery in a way that draws attention to the relationship between the writer and the reader. It is arguably this dislocation that leads these authors to self-conscious engagement with child's play as a way of approaching writing the novel, a mode of writing traditionally associated with disruption and excess. I contrast Bowen's and DeLillo's version of child's play with Oulipo's model of play as a space for radical social transgressions and transformations (a model similar to the Situationist ideal). Georges Perec's work, and other novels written contemporaneously to Oulipo by authors who were not involved in the movement such as Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963), are written as ludic games with flexible rules that govern the reading process. I do not concentrate on works such as these that are more explicitly interested in experimenting with the game as a formal model for the novel; instead, the novels included in this thesis engage precisely with *child's* play and represent toys and games as the material culture of child's play, experimenting with and challenging their symbolic significance. This focus on the significance of child's play grounds this study in a cultural materialist approach to the dialogue between literary representations of toys and the objects themselves. Debates around childhood demand analysis of the Romantic paradigm that still governs ideas of child's play; I examine this paradigm to trace James's, Bowen's and DeLillo's engagement with the ideas of games and play back to a literary history of the figure of the writer-as-child. The debates that cluster around the issue of theorising childhood also refocus analysis of the modernist and postmodernist preoccupation with games towards the creative labour of theorising and the work of framing.

Though these three authors are also known for their short stories, I concentrate on their novels because the novel is considered to be the form most suited to representing interiority, a concept which circulates continuously in debates around child's play.<sup>97</sup> The novels included in this study interrupt the form's capacity to cultivate a sense of interiority or coherent consciousness. They experiment with the ways in which the novel form might, instead, engage with the opacity of child's play and often portray toys as complicated and disruptive instruments in the process of negotiating between the self and the world. The particular version of literary subjectivity that James cultivates for Maisie is based in failures of reading and communication. Bowen and DeLillo both engage with and disrupt this Jamesian notion of literary subjectivity, interrupting it with stubborn intrusions by a material world of unequivocal objects, such as toys which provoke different versions of literary knowledge. This change in the literary relationship with child's play represents the development from a Jamesian belief in a childlike reading that joins in with the performativity of style, to a post-war desire to escape from the determining force of a damaged linguistic and social order which manifests in a turn to child's play as a potentially transcendent and redemptive activity; in Bowen's late novels and in DeLillo's novels, this preoccupation with play, then, provokes their experimentation with ways in which materiality always reasserts itself. For these authors the trope of child's play is an aesthetic solution to epistemological concerns around the value of the novel and literary knowledge. The novel is an exercise in containing consciousness in narrative time; these authors, then, turn to the novel as the ideal form for testing the work of framing and the integrity of boundaries in relation to style, a test through which to discern whether with these elements rigidly in place an epistemology or aesthetics can play out coherently.

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<sup>97</sup> Carolyn Steedman discusses the way literature employs the figure of the child to imagine human interiority and to articulate the concept of a "self". (*Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 1).

I contrast two different versions of child's play in the 1805 *Prelude*, the boy of Winander (Book Fifth) and the child with the toy windmill (Book Tenth), in order to think about these episodes as producing two distinct Romantic models for reading instances of child's play in work by James, Bowen and DeLillo. This pairing of different versions of child's play allows us to consider in the same analytical framework the ways in which James and DeLillo engage with the image of the writer-as-child. I draw out a rebellious narrative of the Romantic child, evident in the work of James, which was submerged within a wider nineteenth-century discourse that focused on the innocence and purity of childhood. Though modernism resists Romanticism in many ways, child's play becomes a recurring Romantic trope as modernist texts revisit the darker possibilities of Wordsworthian childhood. This strand of Romantic unruliness is then continued through to contemporary perspectives on childhood, apparent in DeLillo's work.

By focusing on novelistic representations of toys and games as the sites of conflict in ideas of child's play, this thesis adopts a similar approach to literary knowledge to that taken by Brown in his cultural materialist work on play. He explains that 'as it unconsciously accretes and figures sociohistorical fragments, literature rewrites relations between the particular and the general, the material and the conceptual, the synchronic and the diachronic, the local and the national.'<sup>98</sup> I build on this approach, to consider childhood as one such site of the 'particular' and often 'material' which is employed in literary works, both unconsciously and consciously, for its symbolic value in commenting upon and revising issues of 'general', 'conceptual' or 'national' interest. Unlike Brown, though, I attempt to read *inside* the game of these novels, and in so doing to examine the ways in which James, Bowen and DeLillo turn to child's play and games in *self-conscious* experiments with those moments when writing or reading fails its own tests of coherence.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Jacqueline Rose proposes a mode of 'reading otherwise' influenced by Klein's work which is similar to the reading I suggest here. It is, Rose explains, a reading which heads straight for 'points of creative tension' in an

## 1.4 Chapter Outlines

Following the methodological structure laid out in the title of this thesis, chapters proceed chronologically from an examination of James's response to the Romantic child and her play, to a materialist focus on toys in Bowen's novels, and end with analysis of games in DeLillo's work in relation to poststructuralist interventions into our understanding of language and reality.

The simplicity of the child's knowledge that the Romantic poet expects to experience by joining in child's play, becomes in James's novels a reparative reading founded in playful yet risky engagement with the complexities of language. In Chapter 2 I propose that James develops a childlike reading practice in *What Maisie Knew*; I, then, discuss this in conversation with recent postcritical approaches to reading. I consider *What Maisie Knew* to pre-empt the modernist novel by analysing the ways in which Maisie's reading practice is composed of a series of self-perpetuating truth games. Childlike reading is a reading which uses style as an entry-point through which to join in with lies, to repair them by making them performatively true. This reading practice challenges the 'supreme simplicity' of childhood, exposing transparency as, instead, a strategy for obfuscation, and in so doing providing a model of reading through which we can interpret performances of transparency, performances which usually work to deflect suspicious modes of interpretation.

The influence of this Jamesian notion of literary knowledge can be traced to Bowen's conception of the writer-as-child and her formation, in *The House in Paris* and *Eva Trout*, of isolated children who, unable to participate in the games of surrounding adults and join like Maisie in the novel's poetics of duplicity, instead transform themselves into toys. Childlike reading ultimately fails, in Bowen's novels, when met with the force of material objects such

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author's work and is attuned to the moments when 'writing slips its moorings'; nevertheless, Rose's reading, like Brown's, is only interested in those *unconscious* failures. (*Why War? – Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) p. 138).

as toys which disrupt the centrality of interiority in the novel. Chapter 3 analyses the ways in which these entrancing toys return readers to childhood. Bowen conceives of the writer's relationship to their work through child's play to reinvest in the possibility of fiction, a possibility she perceives as residing in the negative space of innocence. The child's knowledge, then, for Bowen is that of a subjectivity in dialogue with the material world, not a singular subjectivity that might use material objects in order to substantiate the selfhood of a thinking subject.

DeLillo's novel *Underworld* in some ways returns to a Romantic relationship with child's play as a form of knowledge in touch in a direct and immediate way with a discernible 'real'; his work at once laments the loss of this real in his representation of games and toys whilst satirising this melancholic desire to reclaim the real through childhood knowledge. In Chapter 4 I consider multiple examples in which DeLillo's novels turn to the child's knowledge to solve discomfiting ontological or existential concerns regarding mortality and the relationship between language and reality in a fictional postmodern wilderness. Indeed, I argue that his novels experiment with the pure games of poststructuralism only to return to modernist conceptions of child's play.

I explore these shifts in literary turns to child's play through the different symbolic significance attributed to toys and games in novels by James, Bowen and DeLillo. In so doing, I demonstrate that play in the work of these authors becomes in different ways the space of thought: an alternative model for conceiving of the knowledge produced in a literary encounter.

## 2.

### Reading as Child's Play:

#### Jamesian Style and Literary Knowledge in *What Maisie Knew*

*'Their more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness. It's a game,'  
I went on; 'it's a policy and a fraud!'*<sup>100</sup>

Two competing versions of James emerge in the continuing critical debate around his work: James the aesthete and James the moralist. These portrayals of James often circulate around his child characters and, in so doing, stimulate concerns about the ways in which we read representations of childhood in his work. Is James so absorbed by the question of style, by obeying a formalist symmetry, he fails to see that he is torturing children? Far from being a moralist then, is James missing the emotional and personal? By considering the ways in which childhood is read in relation to versions of childlike reading in *What Maisie Knew*, I argue that Jamesian style is not removed from questions of morality and truth, but is primarily concerned with forging an epistemology of style which emerges in the vicissitudes of reading.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (London: Penguin, 1994) p. 69. All subsequent references will appear in text.

<sup>101</sup> This debate around James's moral motives crystallises in *What Maisie Knew* as critics are polarised on the issue of Maisie's sexual knowledge or innocence; F. R. Leavis, for example, argues that Maisie is ignorant of sex ('James's 'What Maisie Knew': A Disagreement', *Scrutiny* (summer 1950) pp. 115-127, p. 126), whereas Harris W. Wilson and others have argued that the relationship between Maisie and Sir Claude is of a sexual nature ('What did Maisie Know?', *College English*, 17:5 (1956) pp. 279-282, p. 281). *What Maisie Knew* has also been read as a condemnation of bad parenting in which Maisie resists the immorality of her parents by developing her own moral sense (Kenny Marotta, 'What Maisie Knew: The Question of Our Speech', *ELH*, 46:3 (1979) pp. 495-508, p. 495); or in contrast as a story of the corruption of innocence (by H. W. Wilson for example). In his Preface to the novel James himself rebuts the contemporary reception of the novel which had criticised as immoral the 'mixing up' of an innocent child with this story of abuse and adultery; with typically sardonic tone James explains that in response to the novel he was lectured in the idea that 'nothing could be well more disgusting than to attribute to Maisie so intimate an 'acquaintance' with the gross immoralities surrounding her.' (Preface to *What Maisie Knew*, *What Maisie Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) pp. 9-10. All subsequent references will appear in text).

With the publication of Henry James's Prefaces, it became clear that he wished to take a more active role in shaping the ways in which his novels were being read and interpreted. Even before he wrote the Prefaces James's novels began resisting certain reading practices and encouraging others; *What Maisie Knew* is

I propose that *What Maisie Knew* produces a specific version of literary knowledge, one that engages with the ways in which the function of morality and truth in the novel is determined by the performativity of style. Building on recent work in post-critical reading, such as Sharon Marcus's and Stephen Best's work on 'surface reading' and Timothy Bewes's work on 'reading with the grain',<sup>102</sup> this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the version of childlike reading that develops in *What Maisie Knew* exemplifies a Jamesian notion of the relationship between style and knowledge. By employing a reading practice which emerges in the intersections of reparative and suspicious modes of interpretation to read the difficulties of the apparently simple child, we can begin to reconsider the ways in which style can make discourse performatively true, and in so doing can develop ways of reading the evasive forms of simplicity and transparency prevalent in contemporary discursive practices.<sup>103</sup>

Demonstrating that a childlike reading practice operates through games of interpretation, this chapter explores whether the performativity of style relies upon the game

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one such novel concerned with the vicissitudes of reading. The title of *The Turn of the Screw* similarly appears to refer to the multiplicity of readings the novella could produce and the pressure the novella puts on the reader's interpretative practice.

<sup>102</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations*, 108 (2009) pp. 1-21, p. 9. Timothy Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism,' *differences*, 21:3 (2010) pp. 1-33, p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> My use of the term 'reparative' builds on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's development of reparative reading practices in her work *Touching Feeling* and takes into account the reparative position in child psychology conceived by Melanie Klein from which Sedgwick developed her theory of reparative reading. In 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' (1937) Klein writes about the ways in which our creative impulses and desire to work originate in feelings of guilt which transform into a desire to repair the source of our guilty feelings. She traces the source of this guilt to destructive phantasies about the mother (*Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945* (London: Virago Press, 1988) pp. 306-344, p. 335). Klein's explanation of the link between identification, guilt and reparation will inform my reading of Maisie's reparative impulses. Klein states that 'the feelings of guilt and despair aris[e] out of this hate and revenge because we have injured the parents whom at the same time we loved - all these, in phantasy, we may undo in retrospect (taking away some of the grounds for hatred), by playing at the same time the parts of our loving parents and loving children. ... This making reparation is, in my view, a fundamental element in love and in all human relationships' (Ibid., p. 312, emphasis added). Moreover, Klein explains the process of 'displacing love (and hate) from one's mother to other people and things, and thus distributing these emotions on to the wider world' (Ibid., p. 326) which she suggests is the process that founds society, culture and 'civilisation'. I use this idea of displacing love and hate onto *things* as a method for distributing emotions to consider Maisie's creation of what I term replacement games, such as truth games. 'Suspicious reading' is used in accordance with Paul Ricoeur's definition of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in Freudian reading, a version of reading which seeks to dig beneath the surface of an object, text or account to render transparent what is hidden.

– either the formalism of the game or contrastingly the amoral unreality of the game – in order to construct the real and the true. In addition, I investigate whether, for James, the logic of the game can repair the immorality in the narrative by filtering interpretation, thus determining meaning and truth and, by extension, producing the novel's reality. By engineering a contained, separate context with its own language and rules, can the game provide a simple rubric for interpreting human 'moves' and motives? Or do these game metaphors contribute an unnecessary degree of obfuscation to the interpretative processes of both Maisie and the reader who is attempting to make some moral sense of James's style? This chapter considers the aesthetic, formal and epistemological value of childhood knowledge for James: a knowledge tied to the games associated with childhood. This version of childhood knowledge exists in tension with "knowledge" of the Romantic child which is "innocent": beyond language, lying and games. The dynamics of reading the child's innocence or knowledge are most obvious in *The Turn of the Screw*.<sup>104</sup> Though it is never

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<sup>104</sup> The pellucidity of the Romantic child makes the child into a see-through figure; the secrecy of Maisie and the children in *The Turn of the Screw* is then all the more sinister in comparison, and, therefore, quickly provokes suspicion in surrounding adult characters, a suspicion which is also demonstrated in critical responses to these works. The ongoing critical debate around *The Turn of the Screw* is polarised on the question of whether the story is simply a ghost story in which the children have been corrupted by the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel, or whether it is a story of mental illness, desire and obsession, in which the children are innocent victims. Edmund Wilson was the first to provide a Freudian reading of the ghosts as projections of the governess' repressed sexuality ('The Ambiguity of Henry James', *A Casebook on Henry James's The Turn of the Screw*, Gerald Willen (ed.) (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960) pp. 115-154. First published in 1934); the novella has since enjoyed a proliferation of Freudian interpretations. Peter G. Beidler, however, argues against Freudian readings of the story, linking Flora's play instead with pedagogical practice in the period ("With holes of different sizes made in them, to admit of sticks": Phallic Playthings in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, *ANQ*, 17:3 (2004) pp. 51-56, p. 55). In contrast with Beidler and orthodox Freudian readings which render the governess neurotic and the child innocent as a result, Ellis Hanson reads Miles as a queer sexual child; he argues that 'Quint, embodies the desires that the reader or the spectator is supposed to find inadmissible, in particular the desire to participate with perverse pleasure rather than paranoid disavowal in the queer erotics of children.' ('Screwing with children in Henry James', *GLQ*, 9:3 (2003) pp. 367-391, p. 368). Similarly, Adam McCune provides a 'surface reading' of the novella to suggest that the central question should not be whether the ghosts are in fact real, but instead what the children desire. He argues that James portrays the children as humans with desires and fears not transcendental figures of innocence. ("What a Boy (or Girl) Wants" in *The Turn of the Screw*: The Children's Frankly Expressed Motives for Their Performances', *English Studies*, 98:8 (2016) pp. 951-967, p. 952). Shoshana Felman explains that there are no 'innocent readers' of this story, that we are tricked into not believing the governess and in so doing come to occupy her position of suspicious reader ('Turning the Screw of Interpretation', *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977) pp. 94-207, p. 97). She believes this unwilling readerly participation was the cause of the disgust towards the story expressed in some of its earliest reviews in *The Outlook* (1898) and *The Independent* (1899) (Ibid., p. 96); she demonstrates that the critic is denied a comfortable distance from the story, unable to stand outside it (Ibid., p. 101). The reader is guilty because they must participate either in the governess' paranoia, or in, what Hanson calls, the 'perverse pleasure' of the 'queer erotics of children', and quickly finds that these two positions are

explicitly discussed, the governess develops a belief that the children were privy to some sexual knowledge regarding the affair between Quint and Miss Jessel who she insists are now haunting the house and communing with the children. She then desperately seeks out what the children know and do not know in order to answer the question of the children's specifically sexual knowledge. After questioning Miles on his and Flora's games – suspecting that these ghostly games might provide the key to deciphering the secret incident at school for which he was expelled – the governess concludes that 'He had given exactly the account of himself that permitted least of my going behind it' (p. 67).<sup>105</sup> The governess wishes the children to be completely transparent, to surrender to her suspicious reading practice: to either allow her to 'go behind' their appearance of simplicity, or offer their knowledge up on the surface.

Transparency is the demand of a suspicious reading practice that if achieved would render that same reading practice redundant. 'Going behind' is, then, an interpretation game at odds with transparency; the logic of transparency holds that there is no behind, that everything must be made visible on the surface, entirely precluding the need for suspicion. The recurring moments at which the governess attempts to look through windows in the novel quite literally reflect, and in so doing heighten, the tension between transparency and 'going behind' in *The Turn of the Screw*. The governess often sees the ghosts when attempting to look through windows: 'The face that was close to mine was as white as the face against the glass' (p. 117). Here the governess stares fixatedly through the window with Miles at what she perceives to be the ghost of Miss Jessel. However, rather than making itself a transparent surface, the window reflects the deathly gaze of the governess herself and predicts Miles's

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intertwined. I show that this pleasure-seeking reading becomes in *What Maisie Knew* a reparative childlike reading, neither innocent nor guilty; instead Maisie's reading practice produces 'that impression of an excess of the queer something which had seemed to waver so widely between innocence and guilt.' (p. 142).

<sup>105</sup> In his Preface to *The Awkward Age* James develops this idea of 'going behind' in relation to constructing a character: 'a Mitchy 'subtle' no less than concrete and concrete no less than deprived of that officious explanation which we know as 'going behind'" ((Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. xlv). James's narratives often layer perspectives in this way to tempt us with the possibility of knowledge of a character's subjectivity without fully revealing anything.

death. This reflecting or deflecting is a form of imitation that exists in tension with the transparency that the governess desperately seeks; as demonstrated in imitative forms of child's play (the children's performances for example), mimesis is not simple representation for James. The window is not an unreadable vehicle of transparency; instead their reflections in the window effect a version of 'going behind' by encouraging readers to look back at their narrator. Driving the reader to develop the same suspicious reading practice as the governess, the narrative leads the reader in turn to question whether the governess is in fact suffering from paranoid delusions caused by her desire for her employer, the children's absent guardian. The window-cum-mirror resists interpretation by reflecting back the scripts that are being projected (in this case that Miles is held in the governess' protection against the aggressive ghosts) and in so doing defamiliarising them.

Every time the governess attempts to 'go behind' the children, she is forced to face her own projections; incapable of this, her projections are converted into the ghosts that haunt the narrative. The governess becomes entangled in her desperation to read the children's transparency suspiciously as a performance that will prove her sanity:

The more I've watched and waited the more I've felt that if there were nothing else to make it sure it would be made so by the systematic silence of each. ... Oh yes, we may sit here and look at them, and they may show off to us there to their fill; but even while they pretend to be lost in their fairy-tale they're steeped in their vision of the dead restored. He's not reading to her,' I declared; 'they're talking of them – they're talking horrors!' (pp. 68-69).

Interested in the value of innocence, its obscurity, and how this complicates the way we read children, both *The Turn of the Screw* and *What Maisie Knew* recreate the uncanny knowledge of the innocent-deceitful child who the reader and the governess fail to "go behind"; these texts, then, probe the consequent social anxieties and fantasies which circulate around this child and the idea of its potential corruption. The governess fears the silence of the child reader who deflects her reading practice. Their reading, she suspects, is a performance, a disguise

for other illicit, perhaps sexual, behaviours such as fraternising with ghosts. The novella demonstrates that the child's opacity holds, for James, a particular kind of truth that cannot be made transparent. The harder the governess tries to read the children the more they resist her reading and hide in 'systematic silence'. There is no reparative reading in *The Turn of the Screw*, only an aggressive suspicion which tortures the children with reading. *What Maisie Knew*, however, thinks about reading the child differently through bringing it into conversation with a reparative childlike reading that is founded in interpretative struggle, misreading and discursive failure.

## 2.1. Interpretative Games: Childhood's 'Supreme Simplicity' and Performances of Transparency

*What Maisie Knew* opens with a vicious custody battle; what develops from this point onwards is a series of new relationships between Maisie, the novel's precocious child heroine, and the members of the many partnerships that her parents enter into only to exit again. Maisie comes to suspect that her mother's new husband and her father's new wife are liaising in secret and starting a relationship of their own. Dictating to Maisie the changes in her marital situation with her new husband, the enchanting Sir Claude, Ida, Maisie's mother, states: "There have been things – between Sir Claude and me – which I needn't go into, you little nuisance, because you wouldn't understand them." Ida decides not to provide Maisie with the details of these changes; the narrator, then, proceeds to elucidate the reasoning behind Ida's statement, explaining that 'It suited [Ida] to convey that Maisie had been kept, so far as she was concerned or could imagine, in a holy ignorance and that she must take for granted a *supreme simplicity*' (p. 134, emphasis added).

Whatever Maisie might have heard or seen, however unpleasant her experiences in her short life, imagining that Maisie conforms to an idea of "the child" as occupying the

highest degree of simplicity – an essentialised utter blankness, purely ignorant by nature – frees Ida from any responsibility. The adults surrounding Maisie assume that the child's 'supreme simplicity' renders her transparent, and crucially that the child herself is not a reader. As a result of these assumptions they believe that there can be no need for an interpretative practice through which to read her. Nevertheless, as the novel progresses the surrounding adults begin to devise methods for reading exactly what Maisie may or may not know; however, these methods have, at best, uncertain results.

Despite her belief that there can be no need for an interpretative practice to read Maisie, Ida is, from the very beginning, suspicious of Maisie's apparent simplicity. 'Supreme simplicity' is an ultimate, inviolate blankness that whilst providing Ida with the exemption from influence that she desires to embrace, is also frighteningly inaccessible. To subdue the suspicion circulating around her simplicity, Maisie must appear transparent: a move that works to collapse the topological relationship between surface and depth upon which a suspicious reading depends. Maisie cultivates this performance of simplicity as blankness or hollowness because to be lacking in content is the only version of transparency available to her. This paradoxical veneer of transparency is, for Maisie, a form of deliberate stylistic opacity; it is within the disappearing space of the veneer of transparency that I want to suggest Jamesian style takes place. 'Supreme simplicity', or transparency by hollowness, presents a slippery surface to the world. Whatever is projected onto the child seems unable to penetrate its impermeable surface, and instead bounces back as if from the surface of a mirror; supposedly 'harmless vacancy' (p. 49) in the form of evacuated responsibility cultivated by Ida is all that Maisie, in her 'supreme simplicity', offers back to her mother.

The logic of transparency demands the invisibility of surfaces; however, Maisie's veneer of transparency demonstrates the ways in which claims to transparency, or the desire for transparency inherent to a suspicious reading practice, can act as surfaces in themselves. Though Ida desperately wants to imagine children as simple, open and transparent, she

remains suspicious of such a seemingly unattainable simplicity: 'It was of a horrid little critical system, a tendency, in her silence, to judge her elders, that this lady suspected her, liking as she did, for her own part, a child to be simple and confiding' (p. 21). Ida suspects Maisie of developing a 'critical system' under the guise of simplicity. The presumption of supreme simplicity would actually work to Maisie's advantage; in a move, quite the opposite of simple, Maisie presents this blank surface in order to conceal her interpretative processes. The silence that Ida so despises is a stylistic strategy depicted in the novel as a sophisticated critical system: a concealed space in which to foster judgment. Style for Maisie is a necessary form of protection; her veneer of transparency conceals her active creative position.

Tracing the growth of its child protagonist, *What Maisie Knew* quickly develops into an intimate exploration of Maisie's 'critical system' or her creative reading practices. The novel immediately complicates the epistemological concern of its title, by reframing this concern in order to explore the relationship between style and interpretative difficulty. Instead of unveiling *what* Maisie knew, the novel raises questions of process and structure, not of content: how do we read Maisie without constructing what she knows? *How* does Maisie know whatever it is that she knows? How, then, does she read? And how does she performatively create through her reading? What does she make possible for the adults who use her "simplicity" in various ways to placate their own sexual guilt? Indeed, what does she make possible for herself in imagining, and creating, a differently moral world, one in which her mother could be loved and be loveable, or one in which she could run away with Sir Claude?

To challenge the fixed paradigm of the supremely simple child, *What Maisie Knew* revises the Romantic legacy of the child's relationship with language. The novel mounts this challenge by employing an enigmatic child figure that eludes representation and resists interpretation, opening up ways by which to investigate the limitations of language and the accompanying difficulties of interpretation. Maisie disrupts the stultifying axiom "seen but

not heard”; though her voice is stymied throughout the novel, her voicelessness works to preclude the problematic ventriloquisation common to representations of childhood. Rather than occupying the passive position of the observed, Maisie is an active observer – a reader who cannot herself be read. The novel traces the way that Maisie’s reading practice develops from somatic to semantic modes of interpretation or ways of knowing. Throughout the novel, Maisie reads bodies as texts – scanning them for subtle, suggestive movements that might reveal underlying motives; latent discursive meanings surface in the tone and texture of the characters’ skins and bodily gestures.

In work on James and adulthood, Teresa Michals argues that Maisie’s ‘gaze gives a new strangeness and new attraction to adulthood’. James’s depiction of the child’s reading practice is, for Michals, a tool for stressing the ‘adults’ deeply interesting difficulties’.<sup>106</sup> The adult world is indeed made ‘difficult’ and interesting through the eyes of James’s child protagonist, but Maisie is not just a passive observer, a simple lens through which adulthood is refracted. Maisie, in all her intractable piquancy, is consistently misunderstood by the adults surrounding her, and continuously proves to be a more complex character than these adults are willing to acknowledge.

The “adult” characters in the novel continually refer to Maisie’s knowledge or lack thereof, and decide on her knowledgeability based on what best suits their context and motive: she is, however young or old, as knowledgeable or innocent as they desire her to be. Maisie eagerly observes the adults surrounding her, awaiting any facial cues to perform; the force of their desire then determines her performance.<sup>107</sup> It is her parents and surrounding adult entourage that first suggest Maisie’s incommunicability is a symptom of idiocy; the

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<sup>106</sup> Teresa Michals, ‘Henry James and the Invention of Adulthood,’ *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 44:2 (2011) pp. 229-248, p. 233.

<sup>107</sup> In *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein writes of the flexibility of meaning attributed to the figure of the child that ‘childhood in performance enabled divergent political positions each to appear natural, inevitable, and therefore justified.’ (*Racial Innocence*, p. 4). She argues that this performance of childhood is scripted by adult expectations transferred onto the material culture that surrounds children, such as dolls, but that these scripts can be transformed by the child in play.

dimensions and trajectory of her perceived growth are then formed within the space provided by this assumption:

The theory of her stupidity, eventually embraced by her parents, corresponded with a great date in her small still life: the complete vision, private but final, of the strange office she filled. It was literally a moral revolution and accomplished in the depths of her nature. ... She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment ... she would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. (pp. 18-19)

Maisie's performance of 'idiocy' takes the form of a combination of amnesia and deafness or dumbness, and is dismissed as disability, as she intended. This childhood nescience is central to Andrew Bennett's compelling work on ignorance, an account which addresses the adult fascination with the ignorance of children and 'the inability of adults to make themselves understood to children'. Bennett suggests that the ignorance of children is a product of 'their dysfunctional communication with us, with adults'.<sup>108</sup> Bennett makes ignorance a question of reading and the processes of interpretation: expression and apprehension. Maisie's apparent 'idiocy' is a matter of the way she is read, or misread, by the adults surrounding her; however, Maisie's awareness of the reparative potential of style means that, although this apparent 'idiocy' stems from adult misreading, she is able to harness the subversive possibilities of ignorance to resist (to some extent) the shaping power of their interpretative practice.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Ignorance: Literature and Angiology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> I suggest that the reparative potential of style comes from the ways in which style operates or emerges performatively. The performativity of style – the way it enacts and produces meaning – means that if the writer can bracket off rhetorical space, create their own interpretation game or truth game with a reparative motive, style can then produce this as truth. Truth in late James is elusive; that which appears to be truthful often turns out to be a sham masquerading as truth. Truth, then, is not a totally absent or imaginary concept in late James; instead it is dependent on style and as such emerges only in accordance with the rules governing the reality of the novel.

Central to Maisie's performance of disability is concealment: conserving and growing identity in secret – in a necessarily engineered delay. Maisie develops this system of growth, which resembles Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of the 'sideways growth' of the queer child, because she has nothing in front of her but a kind of sordid heterosexuality limned by economic motives.<sup>110</sup> Maisie's outwardly stunted linguistic growth enables her hidden growth of interpretation, nurtured through her keen observation of emotion communicated in subtle bodily expressions. Lies provide Maisie with the private space within which to cultivate an inner self. Reading then becomes, in the Winnicottian sense, a 'potential space': a third space through which to mediate between subjective and objective realities, a space which enables Maisie to build otherwise untenable relationships and to begin, to some extent, to influence her universe. James details Maisie's development of her resourceful critical system, portraying its origin in fear and its continued rootedness in suspicion. This system of concealment is built on a practice of hyper-vigilance, which is arguably Maisie's defining trait: she retreats from the danger of words to observe, instead, minute changes in the facial expressions of surrounding adults. Here Maisie learns to take pleasure in a hermeneutic of suspicion as a method for reparation. Maisie's reading practice illustrates the mutually dependent relationship between a suspicious and a reparative hermeneutic, a connection reinforced by Sedgwick in her book *Touching Feeling* in which she suggests that we cannot continue to rely solely on a hermeneutic of suspicion.<sup>111</sup> When Maisie joins in with other characters' lies she makes them performatively true. Maisie performs lies in order to repair and it is in this way – by developing a reparative reading practice – that Maisie maintains what James calls her 'freshness' (p. 8): taking 'refuge on the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth' (p. 26).

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<sup>110</sup> Adulthood is similarly unenticing for potential wild children in novels by Bowen, in which the children face something similar to Maisie, and by DeLillo in which children attempt to resist the forces of global capitalism.

<sup>111</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 124.

*What Maisie Knew* presents an intimate map of Maisie's 'critical system' through which a distinctly reparative childlike reading practice emerges. This reading practice is built on somatic inferences through which words are displaced as the primary signifiers of meaning. For Maisie, the answer to the slippery doubleness of words lies in bodily gestures and in facial movements in particular. The novel quickly becomes about seeing and reading (or misreading) as modes of both verification and affirmation; ways of knowing. In accordance with this, the novel's structure offers a diplopic view of Maisie's world – a double vision which simultaneously illustrates Maisie's fragmented perception of bodies and the structuring perspective of the narrator. Divided between her parents at the start of the novel during their acrimonious divorce, the narrator explains that: 'The mother had wished to prevent the father from, as she said, 'so much as looking' at the child; the father's plea was that the mother's lightest touch was 'simply contamination.' These were the opposed principles in which Maisie was to be educated – she was to fit them together as she might' (p. 13). These 'opposed principles' structure the narrative viewpoint as the novel traces Maisie's attempts to understand and piece together her fragmented world through the mediums of sight and touch. From the beginning of the novel sight and touch are imbued with danger; cautious of the meanings they reveal, Maisie is acutely aware of these sensations, and as a result of this attention they become her means for interpreting and communicating motive, desire, and intimacy. She quickly discovers that 'patient little silences and intelligent little looks could be rewarded by delightful little glimpses' (p. 102). Silent observation is Maisie's primary method for learning and interpreting; the glimpses she receives are material sights that provide insights into latent meanings or motives from which she is usually excluded.

After a protracted period of absence from her father, Beale, Maisie encounters him at an exhibition in London and is whisked away to a lavish apartment belonging to the Countess who we assume is his new lover. What follows is an extraordinary passage in which Maisie and her father have a series of unspoken bodily interactions which culminate in

Maisie's clear reception of his intentions. By now Maisie has developed into an astute and insightful reader of unspoken human behaviours and she employs this interpretative practice with a ruthless innocence enabling her to read Beale's awkwardness with acuity beyond her years. Maisie feels sorry for her father, 'so well could she privately follow his difficulty in being specific to her about anything. She had such possibilities of vibration, of response, that it needed nothing more than this to make up to her in fact for omissions' (p. 112). Beale intends to goad Maisie into relieving him of any further tie to her whilst maintaining his pretence of magnanimity. Beale's embarrassed, elliptical attempts to convey his ignoble intentions intrigue Maisie. Empathising with the difficulty of making something complex appear simple, and with her father's consequent discursive inadequacies, Maisie fills the tense void in conversation with a multiplicity of imagined responses. Maisie's characteristically lambent 'vibrations of response' emerge in contrast to the miasma through which they are transmitted, portrayed by the narrative as a foreboding atmosphere laden with barely concealed meaning.

In a struggle which foregrounds James's subtle inversion of difficulty and transparency within the narrative, Beale's manipulative attempt to invert his abandonment of Maisie into her abandonment of him is stunted by his difficulty in communicating his overture with any clarity to a mind he believes to be so simple. Confronting what he perceives as Maisie's simplicity with an offer of false transparency only results in communicative difficulty and befuddlement. Maisie senses Beale's desire for her to play a particular role that will relieve the intense humiliation of their conversation thus far: 'There was something in him that seemed, and quite touchingly, to ask her to help him to pretend' (p. 113). Beale desires for Maisie to pretend that there is some gracefulness in their relations with each other – that their tie is predicated on him having some knowledge of her life and of 'her view of himself'. This non-verbal, almost telepathic, plea is structured through the shame that both characters feel at the revelation that is now unavoidably hanging between them: the

unequivocal and discomfiting realisation that Beale intends to sever all ties to Maisie whilst attempting to perpetuate an irreproachable appearance of virtue.

In order to repair the challenging situation surrounding her, to read and respond to it, Maisie must engage with lies by reading suspiciously. She is not a reader seeking a direct relationship with truth, a reader who understands the discourse or text as transparent. Instead, she wants to read for the good, and this task is not always simple. Maisie's reading practice is not as much about gaining knowledge, or securing meaning, as it is about the performance of knowledge, putting interpretation to work for the advancement of pleasure. For Maisie this advancement of pleasure is indistinguishable from the advancement of morality; truth and morality, however, cannot be known in a way that would extricate them from their context. *What Maisie Knew* is a novel which resists knowing and in so doing provides other *ways* of knowing or 'style[s] of knowing'.<sup>112</sup> Maisie waits in Beale's awkwardness for him to give her the cue to perform – to use her reparative reading practices to make his lies performatively true; however, a callow Beale is incapable of providing even this, and instead ruptures their unspoken communication in a display of physical exorbitance reminiscent of the ways in which Maisie is pinched, pulled and pushed by surrounding adults earlier in the novel – his final plea for repudiation is 'communicated in a series of tremendous pats on the back' (p. 116). This overtly excessive, almost aggressive, form of physical communication harks back to the beginning of the novel when Maisie's interpretative practice is first outlined as being structured through the opposed principles of sight and touch.

The narrative continues to detail the subtle nuances of extradiscursive meaning in their sensuous conversation, shifting from touch to sight: 'there was an extraordinary mute

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<sup>112</sup> Understood as an exploration of modes of interpretation or 'style[s] of knowing', *What Maisie Knew* anticipates Sontag's argument about interpretation. Sontag asserts that 'the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgement) in itself' ('On Style,' p. 22).

passage between her vision of this vision of his, his vision of her vision, and her vision of his vision of her vision' (p. 113). The multiple meanings of vision become salient when disentangling this matrix of visions. Maisie and her father enter into unspoken communion in which their physical vision locks together to reveal for Maisie, with a prophetic power, an anticipatory view of her father's intentions and how he is reading her. This charged and multivalent interweaving of visions is a remarkable display of misreading. When disentangled, it reveals Maisie's awareness of how her father is misreading her; but more than that, it seems to reveal to Maisie the way that Beale perceives her interpretative practice, and in so doing it exhibits how his misreading of her occurs through the imposition of assumptions about what childlike reading might look like. There is perhaps a subtext of ironic doubling occurring here, as James sardonically mimics his own attempt to forge a childlike reading practice. In this matrix of visions, loaded silences are rendered on the surface of the text alongside the misreadings they provoke. 'Surface reading', write Best and Marcus, is reading to match these 'textual moments of silence, deferral, acceptance';<sup>113</sup> as readers we are implicated in the misreading that occurs here in a way that invites us to adopt the same acceptance Maisie shows in response, which is to defer to her father for the prompt to perform.

Maisie's generous reading practice is not without suspicion, as demonstrated by the encounter with her father, but, joining with the poetics of deceit that emerges in the text, she collapses the critical distance upon which a solely suspicious reading depends. The version of morality she has developed means that she cannot occupy the innocent, disinterested position that this critical distance implies; instead, critical distance and the apparent mastery it enables are replaced by a reparative reading which involves proximity and complicity. In his essay questioning the value of critique, Bruno Latour suggests that the critic 'is not one who debunks, but the one who assembles'.<sup>114</sup> Instead of taking apart her father's lies Maisie

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<sup>113</sup> Best and Marcus, 'Surface Reading' p. 17.

<sup>114</sup> Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30: 2 (2004) pp. 258-277, p. 246.

joins with them, becomes complicit in them, resolving to read ‘alongside’ him, to repair his lies by making them performatively true and in so doing form alternative styles of knowing. Childlike reading then proposes that we harness the performative potential of style to create assemblages; like Timothy Bewes’s model of ‘reading with the grain’, childlike reading ‘commits itself ... to the *most generous reading possible*.’<sup>115</sup>

Bewes’s ‘reading with the grain’ is indebted to Paul Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutics of recollection’, a mode of interpretation developed by Ricoeur in his work on Freud in opposition to the familiar ‘hermeneutics of suspicion.’ Bewes explains that by proposing a ‘hermeneutics of recollection’ – one that wishes to ‘describe and not to reduce’ – ‘Ricoeur’s intention is to arrive at a “second naïveté” ... a truth of the object born of the encounter with it.’<sup>116</sup> By developing a reading practice originating in a suspicion which then generates the desire for reparation, childlike reading achieves the ‘second naïveté’ sought by Ricoeur. This *second* naïveté is arrived at through a graciousness that takes into account the performativity of style: that considers interpretation to take place in the inherently precarious Winnicottian potential space of *experiencing* as ‘an activity without hope of an encounter with reality other than the reality of its encounter with the object’.<sup>117</sup>

Style is performative in that it both enacts and produces the epistemological economy of the novel; the status of language, rhetoric and narrative as either truthful or deceitful is cemented by the novel’s stylistic rubric. Style forms the reality of the novel insofar as it establishes the laws through which the veracity of language is produced. Concealed on the surface of the text, enacting, and thus participating in these stylistic laws, Maisie attempts to make the lies of the surrounding adults appear necessary or natural; in conversation with her father, for example, Maisie makes his awkward mode appear natural and makes his lies necessarily true by partaking in a form of intersubjective stylistic compliance. This intimate

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<sup>115</sup> Bewes, ‘Reading with the Grain’, p. 4, original emphasis.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

moment between Maisie and Beale demonstrates, however, how this version of stylistic performance often fails by relying so heavily on participation. The stylistic sharing in the novel is not always reciprocated or even understood by the other characters, or by the reader – for it to work it relies on the development of a reparative reading practice, a specific mode of reception open to the complexities of James’s poetics of deceit. A childlike reading practice, then, in its sense of ‘vibrations of response’, embraces Ricoeur’s understanding of the ‘fullness of language,’ the ability of language, as Bewes describes, to ‘retain[s] its “opacity” even at its most apparently transparent’.<sup>118</sup> For James language is never far from a performance of transparency: his style embraces this disappearing space to demonstrate a version of literary knowledge complicit in the ungraspable opacity of language.

James’s late novels are notorious for their increasingly circumlocutious style and their intimations of irony and double-meanings through a proliferation of puns and suggestive inverted commas, all of which complicate the ways in which his novels can be read. Such ‘Intricate, hermetic, demanding’ style, Susan Sontag explains, ‘is often felt to be a form of insincerity’.<sup>119</sup> Here Sontag is addressing what she perceives as the misplaced prioritisation of content over style in dominant modes of interpretation. Maisie becomes the ideal Jamesian reader (and in this way a figure for James himself, or the James of the Prefaces) as she develops into and through this supposed insincerity of style. James resists the demand for content to reveal itself unproblematically through the transparency of style. His ironic references to ‘supreme simplicity’ imply that in this text simplicity is seen as a notably aestheticised cultural ideal that is imposed upon language and style. The plainness and lack of intricacy, freedom from ornateness, artifice and affectation of simplicity as it is imposed on the supposedly transparent child is consistently undermined by Maisie’s complicit interactions with the stylistic duplicity of the narrative. Sincerity, like simplicity, is a poetic

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>119</sup> Sontag, ‘On Style’, p. 16.

ideal described by M. H. Abrams ‘as the near equivalence of ‘spontaneous’ and ‘natural’, in opposition to what is artful or contrived’.<sup>120</sup> These qualities – spontaneity, naturalness, sincerity – are superimposed onto the aestheticised figure of the “simple” child; the child then becomes the embodiment of poetic language at its closest relation to truth. The freedom from artifice or deceit inherent to the figure of the supremely simple child allows us to imagine a transparent relationship with both the self and the world. For James, however, clarity is not achieved by pursuing an imagined simplicity. The distinctive aestheticisation of difficulty in his late style works to reveal narrative content in a way that recreates the complexity of both the adulthood and *childhood* emotions and motives he is attempting to represent, and as a result, provides ways for us to think about *transparency* as a strategy for obfuscation.<sup>121</sup>

By foregrounding the question of how we read the child, James reconfigures the relationship between transparency and difficulty. Describing childhood as a ‘muddled state’, not a state of simple transparency, James’s Preface to the novel establishes the complicated relationship between transparency and confusion that plays out throughout the novel; he asserts that ‘the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of realities, that it also has colour and form and character’ (p. 10). This description lends the muddled state a sense of paradoxical clarity in its sharpness. Maisie’s muddled interpretative style and her inscrutability

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<sup>120</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 320.

<sup>121</sup> In his Preface to *The Awkward Age*, James discusses the failure of his attempt at writing a play; he mocks the critical reception of his play and the demand for the ‘clarity’ and simplicity that would placate the infantile public: ‘The process simply collapses under pressure, they contend, proves its weakness as quickly as the office laid on it ceases to be simple. ... ‘Remember,’ they say to the dramatist, ‘... Make the thing you have to convey, make the picture you have to paint, at all rich and complex, and you cease to be clear. Remain clear – and with the clearness required by the infantine intelligence of any public consenting to see a play – and what becomes of the “importance” of your subject? If it’s important by any other critical measure than the little foot-rule the “produced” piece has to conform to, it is predestined to be a muddle.’ (Preface to *The Awkward Age*, pp. xli-xlii). James also refers to the muddled state in contrast to the demand for clarity, an idea which recurs throughout the Prefaces. In this Preface James continues to make the point that the muddled state is not one of opaque complexity but is in fact how he achieves the clarity and sharpness of *The Awkward Age*. He states: ‘I have been positively struck by the quantity of meaning and the number of intentions, the extent of *ground for interest*, as I may call it, that I have succeeded in working scenically, yet without loss of sharpness, clearness or ‘atmosphere’, into each of my illuminating Occasions’ (Ibid., pp. xlv-xlvi).

become inseparable forces and are recreated in sharp intense colour to form the structure and style of the novel. The logic of transparency holds that if something is complex it is actually muddled. For James the muddled style is a different form of complexity that is generative in its confusion of the organised reality of the novel; this is noticeable in the intertwining of visions between Maisie and Beale as they discuss her imminent abandonment. The novel is built on this ironic chiasmic principle that inscrutability can become transparent, and the reverse, that transparency can become inscrutable.

James's Preface also explains how he constructed the novel by attending to the seemingly impossible double bind of negotiating Maisie's inscrutability and mapping the ways in which she misinterprets the situation surrounding her:

The infant mind would at the best leave great gaps and voids; so that with a systematic surface possibly beyond reproach we should nevertheless fail of clearness of sense. I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness materially and inevitably *saw*; a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn't understand at all or would quite misunderstand – and on those lines, only on those, my task would be prettily cut out. 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 connections of her proximity and her attention; only as it might pass by her and appeal to her, as it might touch her and affect her, for better or worse, for *perceptive gain* or *perceptive loss*: so that we fellow-witnesses, we not more invited but only more expert critics, should feel in strong possession of it. (p. 7, emphasis added).

James presents 'the whole' of Maisie's situation through a combination of what she observes and how these observations 'affect her'; the narrative then amplifies her misunderstandings through detailing what Maisie 'materially' saw. Readers of the novel become 'fellow-witnesses', observing her world as an amalgamation of intensely focalised body parts: faces, eyes, hands.<sup>122</sup> James draws attention here to the reader as an uninvited 'witness' of Maisie's

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<sup>122</sup> In his work on shame and embarrassment, Charles Darwin cites *Essays on Practical Education* by Maria and R. L. Edgeworth (1822) to explain that 'It has been well urged that 'nothing hurts young people more than to be watched continually about their feelings, to have their countenances scrutinized, and the degrees of their sensibility measured by the surveying eye of the unmerciful spectator. Under the constraint of such examinations they can think of nothing but that they are looked at, and feel nothing but shame or apprehension.' Contrary to the late nineteenth-century idea that children should be "seen and not heard,"

situation, framing reader and witness as positions of power in a move that by proxy grants Maisie a share in this constitutive power through her role as a *fellow* observer. Cautious of presenting a childlike reading that assumes knowledge of the inner workings of the child's mind, James undertakes to depict the circumstances external to Maisie, whilst simultaneously attempting to imagine ways in which she might misinterpret her material experiences, leaving 'gaps and voids' in the narrative. He gives the whole situation surrounding Maisie, but only through her partial perception of it. Refusing to militate against 'perceptive loss', he embraces the opacity of the child's mind, challenging us to become childlike readers in order to read generously *alongside* this opacity. The game of interpretation that operates throughout the novel works through this conceptual economy of perceptive gain and perceptive loss. Maisie's misinterpretation leads to some perceptive loss for the reader, in that the narrative is not rendered wholly transparent; however, the misreadings that occur as a result of this formulation are generative of other perspectives: other games of interpretation or styles of knowing.

For Maisie the difficulty of these games of interpretation leads to misreadings in which she can conceal herself and which provoke her reparative reading practice. Moments of opacity in the narrative and the consequent perceptive loss, circulate around those occasions when adult characters make overly generous assumptions about Maisie's knowledge. Gossiping about Sir Claude with Maisie, Mrs Wix, in the form of a sigh, acknowledges 'the scruples' Maisie has 'surmounted', 'scruples' which are never detailed with specific attention in the narrative. This sigh, the narrator tells us, 'seemed to ask

what other line one *could* take with a young person whose experience had been, as it were, so peculiar. 'It isn't as if you didn't already know everything, is it, love?' and 'I can't make you any worse than you *are*, can I, darling?' ... What the pupil already knew was indeed rather taken for granted than expressed. (p. 51).

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Darwin explores the violence of looking and concludes that the blush is caused by this 'intolerable gaze' (*The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009) p. 38). Darwin's conclusion contrasts with the surveillance of children advocated by thinkers such as Rousseau and G. Stanley Hall.

These assumptions that Maisie's knowledge is corrupted, work to hide from the reader what it is that Maisie *does* know, and simultaneously lead the reader to further suspect the developing relationships between Maisie's step-parents early on in the novel. Later in the novel Maisie learns to hide in these assumptions of her knowledge, actively declaring that she 'knows' in order to gain information about her situation. This information is, however, never explicitly shared with the eager reader. When Sir Claude whisks Maisie off to France it transpires that Mrs Wix has been trying to get in contact with the pair after a meeting with Ida. When Maisie questions Sir Claude about it he replies 'Oh, you know!'; Maisie's response is a prompt 'Yes – I know!'. The narrative, however, continues to state 'What she knew, what she *could* know, is by this time no secret to us: it grew and grew at any rate, the rest of that day, in the air of what he took for granted. It was better he should do that than attempt to test her knowledge' (p. 144). Maisie's knowledge is, once more, taken 'for granted' or misread; like Maisie's, the reader's knowledge of what is going on in the story grows in the 'air', the blank space or assertive absence, of the knowledge the narrator takes for granted and assumes is 'no secret to us'.

Talking with Sir Claude after his first introduction to Mrs Beale, Maisie happily exclaims that Mrs Beale had told her she had 'brought' the two step-parents 'together' (p. 56). She adds 'Just as I brought papa and her. Don't you remember she said so?'

It came back to Sir Claude in a peal of laughter. 'Oh yes – she said so!'

'And *you* said so,' Maisie lucidly pursued.

He recovered, with increasing mirth, the whole occasion. 'And *you* said so! He retorted as if they were playing a game.

'Then were we all mistaken?'

He considered a little. 'No, on the whole not. I dare say it's just what you *have* done. We *are* together – it's really most odd. (p. 56).

She later continues to assert, in response to Sir Claude's comment that he and Mrs Wix are 'shoulder to shoulder', that she has brought them together too. To which Sir Claude again simply laughs and agrees.<sup>123</sup> Sir Claude's vague but allusive responses make the two levels of their conversation into a game; they allow Maisie to take pleasure in the thought that she has made connections between people who otherwise would have shared no intimate relation at all, while at the same time signalling to the reader that there is more to this 'bringing together' than Maisie realises here. This familiarly subtle Jamesian linguistic irony around matters of money and sex is clear enough for the reader to anticipate the development of a relationship between Maisie's step-parents. At this point, however, Maisie is seemingly unaware of the sexual overtones in this concept of 'bringing together', and her ironic revelatory misreading prompts the humour in the narrative.

Discussing the role of the narrator in *What Maisie Knew*, Kevin Ohi explores the ways in which the novel 'makes manifest that the positing of a naïveté through which truth might be revealed often relies on the assertion that the naïve child does not understand the revelation it makes. The child able to speak the truth because it does not know what it is saying ... makes necessary the positing of an interpretive faculty ... above the child to make the child's speech comprehensible, to bring knowledge and speech back into alignment'.<sup>124</sup> Despite its presumed transparency, this transcendent supreme simplicity is difficult to read;

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<sup>123</sup> Discussing Maisie's literal use of language, Marotta argues that Maisie resists the speech of surrounding adults who disguise their motives through 'corrupting their language' and in so doing she redeems language making 'meaningful speech' possible ('The Question of Our Speech', pp. 495-496). Roisin Laing builds on Marotta's argument to explore the supposed purity of the child's mind; she suggests that the child's knowledge, considered to be beyond language, when put into words reveals the 'disjunction between Maisie's innocent, "faithful" use of language and the language itself' (*What Maisie Knew: Nineteenth-Century Selfhood in the Mind of the Child*, *HJR*, 39:1 (2018) pp. 96-109, p. 106). Writing on *The Turn of the Screw*, Felman, in contrast, demonstrates that James considers this fidelity to the literal to be 'vulgar' because the literal 'blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution' ('Turning the Screw of Interpretation,' p. 107). She quotes from a letter from James to H. G. Wells in which he is discussing *The Turn of the Screw* and states "the difficulty itself is the refuge from the vulgarity" (Dec. 1898) (*Ibid.*, p. 106). I suggest that Maisie quickly learns to exploit the interpretative difficulties of language to create her own graceful and gracious truths.

<sup>124</sup> Kevin Ohi, 'Narrating the Child's Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*', *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (eds.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) pp. 81-107, p. 96.

it resists interpretation in a way that necessitates narration. James's narrator does intervene to explain events that the child's mind would be unable to render cogently, however, even in these moments of narratorial mediation James's prose pushes against the limits of the comprehensible. Knowledge and speech are continuously *misaligned* in a way that brings difficulties of communication and interpretation to the fore. Ohi attributes this idea of the naïve child's unconscious relationship with 'truth' to the 'Romantic cults of childhood'. His account identifies the bond between naivety and truth, ignorance and transparency; it is through acknowledging this close connection that we come to see that the myth of the uncanny knowingness of the child is dependent upon her 'holy ignorance'. Maisie's ignorance is however, to some extent, a cultivated performance, and her knowledge is not as uncanny as the adults surrounding her would like to imagine; instead, it is accrued through her necessarily astute observation of adult life.

In work addressing the child as a site of affective material rupture in the unreality of free indirect discourse, Caselli asserts that 'the child is usually not seen, not read and interpreted precisely because it works as spontaneity, transparency and matter'.<sup>125</sup> Maisie's experience is not a rupture in James's narrative; rather it constitutes the framework of the narrative and as such James is directly addressing this figurative function of the child as a marker of transparency. Maisie cannot be interpreted in any categorical sense because she adopts the disguise of a Romantic child: transparent and simple. Her apparent supreme simplicity interrupts suspicious modes of interpretation and challenges the capacity for readerly mastery to make its object transparent. James renders ignorance – in the form of transparent naivety – not just paradoxically inaccessible, but also unachievable. As Ohi explains, naivety cannot be wholly transparent; although naivety supposedly enables a transparent relationship between the subject and the world, this experiential truth has to be translated by the "knowledgeable" narrator.

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<sup>125</sup> Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', p. 243.

Addressing this exchange of knowledge from character to narrator to reader, Dorrit Cohn discusses *What Maisie Knew* as a novel in which James exploits the advantages of psycho-narration. Cohn explains that the form of psycho-narration that James uses not only ‘order[s] and explain[s] a character’s conscious thoughts better than the character himself, it can also effectively articulate a psychic life that remains unverbalized, penumbral, or obscure. Accordingly psycho-narration often renders, in a narrator’s knowing words, what a character “knows,” without knowing how to put it into words’.<sup>126</sup> Ignorance or naivety are forms of obscuration which necessitate a reader, interpreter or narrator, but in *What Maisie Knew* this reading or narration is always partial; the complexity of James’s style coupled with the conflicting agendas of his characters, and at times his narrators, work to emphasise the opacity of other minds and, indeed, our ignorance of our own minds.

The growth of knowledge for Maisie, then, takes on the form of the enhancement of her performance of simplicity; this stylistic decision becomes her camouflage as she learns that simplicity makes her difficult to read. In contrast with the Romantic child, knowledge is controversially depicted by James as an empowering not a corrupting force. Continuing this tension with the pervasive Romantic image of the child as a prelapsarian site of linguistic freedom, Maisie’s relationship with language is complicated throughout the novel. Far from being free of language, in her pre-linguistic state at the very beginning of the novel, Maisie is subject to it, shaped by it, and immured by words she cannot understand. In her work on *What Maisie Knew*, Mary Cross argues that the novel presents ‘the growth of knowledge as a distinctly verbal activity’.<sup>127</sup> I want to suggest, however, that as she develops Maisie learns that finding the words to express herself is not of paramount importance. As her knowledge of her surrounding situation heightens, Maisie becomes increasingly concerned with what words she should *not* speak in order to repair a situation. Although she recognises that words

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<sup>126</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) p. 46.

<sup>127</sup> Mary Cross, *Henry James: The Contingencies of Style* (London: Macmillan, 1993) p. 72.

do have the power to transform a situation, Maisie is equally, and often more interested in the transformative power of silence: ‘what particular word she could speak *or not speak*, ... that might for everyone ... give a better turn to the crisis’ (p. 113, emphasis added). Maisie even begins to ‘read the unspoken into the spoken’ (p. 162) as she learns that it is not within utterances but within silences that meaning can be discovered, or rather devised, in all its lustrous dimensions.

It is Maisie’s silence that provokes Ida’s suspicion of her ‘critical system’; Ida fears that within this silence Maisie conceals complex processes of interpretation and judgment. These silences, like the supreme simplicity expected of her, offer Maisie a blank slate from which there is no categorical *knowledge* to be gleaned, only potential space for interpretation. For Maisie survival becomes less about what words she knows or does not know, and more about how to interpret a situation creatively. Maisie’s trip to France is portrayed as freeing her from the constraints of what she knows or does not know, and this new freedom brings with it an eagerness to ‘dazzle with interpretations’ (p. 152). She is enthralled not by simple translation but by the process of interpretation: the possibilities of meaning that surface in an unfamiliar language, and that provide her with the opportunity to exhibit her insightful and creative reading practice.

The novel explores obscure corners of knowing, those pockets of intensity in which the child’s knowledge ‘darkens off’ into the unutterable; contrary to being a ‘distinctly verbal activity’, the growth of knowledge is depicted as a sensuous bodily experience. The child’s growth pattern is not a unidirectional movement from passive innocence to initiated participant; instead, Maisie is an active social participant from the start. Maisie quickly learns to secretly cultivate a position of silent observer. As James explains in his Preface, the position of the ‘wondering witness’ is an active performance; he describes it as ‘The active, contributive, close-circling wonder ... in which the child’s identity is guarded and preserved’

(p. 10). Ensnared in this 'close-circling wonder' Maisie develops her creative interpretative practice – a 'critical system' founded on reading somatic tensions.

As Beale's lover, the Countess, returns to the flat, interrupting the unspoken communication between Maisie and Beale and encountering Maisie for the first time, the tone of the interaction between Maisie and Beale instantly shifts: 'There was a silence again between them, but with a different shade of embarrassment from that of their united arrival' (p. 119). A shift in the 'shade' of their embarrassment signals the corresponding shift in their relationship. This blushing then works in tension with the Countess's own non-white skin which strikes Maisie as out of place; the narrative then provides a highly derogatory description of the Countess's appearance from Maisie's perspective: 'It was all the effect of her face – the child simply couldn't look at it and meet its expression halfway.' (p. 121). Although she can apparently read the Countess's interest in her as a kindness, Maisie fails to engage with it; unconscious racism is rendered visible on the surface of the text as skin tone directly interferes in Maisie's reading process.

Throughout the novel the manifold intensities, shades and motions of the blush are carefully recreated. Maisie's mind is attuned to recognising the fluctuating shades of colour that signify various emotions or motives; shades of embarrassment come in a variety of hues including 'red', 'crimson', 'pink', 'purple' and 'scarlet'. Embarrassment is sticky and infectious, attaching itself to objects and ideas as well as to other characters. In intimate conversation with Sir Claude, Maisie notices that 'the violence with which she had just changed colour had brought into his own face a slight compunctious and embarrassed flush' (p. 77). The blush as the visual symptom of shame is imminently mobile and highly contagious. While still in her pre-linguistic stage, it is the 'crimson face' of Maisie's beloved nanny that causes her to make the connection between her father's words, which she cannot understand, and Moddle's unexplained disappearance (p. 17).

These shades of blush, that recurrently ‘flush’ to the surface throughout James’s fiction, present an indiscriminate, intergenerational network of communication through the exhibition of shame which disintegrates the border between adult and child. In *Emile* Rousseau states: ‘Blushes are the sign of guilt; true innocence is ashamed of nothing’.<sup>128</sup> Shame for Rousseau indicates guilt and loss of innocence; James’s version of the affect, however, is much more complex: any innocence or guilt that occurs in the novel is offset by, or indicates, the other. For James, shame is the most contagious of the affects: indiscriminate and certainly not simply synonymous with guilt, it is depicted spreading throughout the novel in the texture and tone of both the characters’ skins and the narrative voice. At the same time, the lack of shame or guilt in the adults surrounding Maisie is an issue which the adults rationalise away verbally to Maisie and which she then is compelled to reinforce. Nevertheless, blushing as the visual signifier of shame still infects everyone engaged in facial, bodily and emotional communication.

Rousseau, however, fears the hidden depth of these surface moments of shame celebrated by James. Visual signs of affect marking the skin, such as blushing, allude to subcutaneous motions that Rousseau claims initiate the child into an “adult” world of hidden motive and desire. Rousseau’s solution to this problem is to advocate a cultivated, impervious achromasia – a colourless facial blankness – and the control of adult facial expressions around children so as to delay the recognition of latent desires for as long as possible; this is an eminently treacherous task, especially for James’s characters, who often reveal a great deal by a subtle roll of the eyes. Adumbrating the ways in which we might preserve the child’s innocence through a combination of control of facial expressions and direct, simple speech Rousseau asserts that

Without this all our efforts to keep him in ignorance fail sooner or later; a smile, a wink, a careless gesture tells him all we sought to hide; it is enough to teach him to perceive that

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<sup>128</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or, On Education*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (Cavalier Classics, 2015) p. 170.

there is something we want to hide from him. The delicate phrases and expressions employed by persons of politeness assume a knowledge which children ought not to possess, and they are quite out of place with him, but when we truly respect the child's innocence we easily find in talking to him the simple phrases which befit him. There is a certain directness of speech which is suitable and pleasing to innocence; this is the right tone to adopt in order to turn the child from dangerous curiosity. By speaking simply to him about everything you do not let him suspect there is anything left unsaid.<sup>129</sup>

Rousseau explains that we must not only police what is said around children but must also limit the unsaid revealed by the body. He believes that speaking in a simple fashion removes the suspicion of the unsaid; Rousseau asserts that the quiet of 'confusion' which fosters suspicion must be prevented at all costs by a commitment to expressing emotion sincerely. Innocence, for Rousseau, is directly related to both the child's reading practice and the ease of reading the child. For Rousseau the doubleness of language, which so fascinates James, is both a sign and a cause of corruption that is then unproblematically resolved in the figure of the child. The transparent child joins language and emotion to render singular meanings visible on the surface of the body.

The work of psychologist G. Stanley Hall was influenced by the prevalence of Romanticism in nineteenth-century discourse around the transparency of childhood. In 'Children's Lies' (1891) Hall describes childhood as a period of maturation in which the tendency to invent, perform or lie must be inhibited by observing adults; exuberant childhood fantasy, play and performance are discouraged. Hall asserts that 'control [of imagination] and not its elimination is what is to be sought in the high interest of truthfulness.'<sup>130</sup> The playful performances of the child disrupt adult desires for the child to

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>130</sup> Hall, 'Children's Lies', p. 215. Hall writes that children's lies, though for the most part 'gracious and innocent, may lead to so many kinds of divorce of thought from reality and of self-deception'. (Ibid., p. 215). He goes on to state that 'The effort to act a part or fill a place in life for which Nature has not made us, whether it be school-bred, or instinctively fascinating to intoxication as it is for feeble, characterless, psychophysics constitutions, is one of the chief sources of waste of moral energy in modern society. Lies, acted, spoken, imagined, give that morbid self-consciousness so titileting [sic] to neurotic constitutions.' (Ibid., p. 218). Maisie harnesses this quality of imaginative play to create alternative 'places' or futures. Imaginative play in the form of truth games provides for Maisie the space to experiment with different

be transparent. By actively discouraging play in order to engineer the semblance of transparency, the boundary between transparency and duplicity must be constantly policed. Hall's transparent child is at odds with Maisie's active concealment and her willingness to share in the text's stylistic duplicity. This practice of concealment is the antithesis of Ida's desire for the child to be open, 'simple and confiding' in line with Rousseau's theory of the 'indiscretion of innocence'. Rousseau writes of Emile that 'He has all the indiscretion of innocence; he is absolutely out-spoken; he does not even know the use of deceit. Every impulse of his heart is betrayed either by word or look, and I often know what he is feeling before he is aware of it himself.'<sup>131</sup> Here Rousseau asserts that, due to Emile's innocence, he can see straight through him; by reading Emile's supposedly transparent body Rousseau believes he can know what Emile is feeling before Emile himself becomes conscious of his emotions. For Rousseau ignorance, innocence and transparency are mutually dependent concepts, and the integrity of these concepts as they coexist harmoniously in Emile's transparent body support Rousseau's position of knowledge. On representations of bodies in novels Bennett writes: 'The body remains, at some level, unreadable and unread, remains an absence, a blank, just a body.'<sup>132</sup> The disruptive potential of the material body relates to Caselli's work on the child's body puncturing the narrative flow of free indirect discourse through symbolising matter, embodiment and affect.<sup>133</sup> The body as 'just a body' becomes supremely simple and thus transcendent in a way that resists our reading practices; the body is set up as the thing itself as opposed to subjectivity (the reading mind or consciousness). Maisie can only perform the transparency desired of her by making herself appear as hollow as Rousseau's Emile. This version of transcendence through embodiment presents a contrast

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potential identities, separate from her family; Maisie, then, employs robust heroic lies in the service of the new truths she engineers.

<sup>131</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 270.

<sup>132</sup> Bennett, *Ignorance*, p. 159.

<sup>133</sup> This model of childhood transcendence through embodiment can be traced back to the Wordsworthian model of the boy of Winander who makes bodily noises that are not language. Through these noises he still represents or at least mimics; however, what this represents is a total transparent connection or oneness with nature.

to Rousseau's theory of the body as a transparent surface on which everything that exists underneath is immediately and clearly inscribed.

I am not arguing that for James the answer to the doubleness of words lies in the body. Instead I want to suggest that this somatic language exposes linguistic or semantic ambiguities without revealing what is meant and artificially fixing meaning. Mrs Wix and Sir Claude often attempt, for example, to rescue Maisie's mother in her eyes; however, these moments are, for the reader, steeped in unavoidable irony: 'There were occasions when [Sir Claude] even spoke as if he had wrenched his little charge from the arms of a parent who had fought for her tooth and nail.' (p. 60). The narrative then outlines a particularly aggressive event of this nature in which Ida causes a dramatic scene, declaring that Sir Claude is taking Maisie away from her:

She suddenly thrust the child away and, as a disgusted admission of failure, sent her flying across the room into the arms of Mrs Wix, whom at this moment and even in the whirl of her transit Maisie saw, very red, exchange a quick queer look with Sir Claude.

The impression of the look remained with her, confronting her with such a critical little view of her mother's explosion that she felt the less ashamed of herself for incurring the reproach with which she had been cast off. ... she was only, more than anything else, curious about the opinion mutely expressed by their companions. (p. 60).

The blushes and 'quick queer' looks of Mrs Wix and Sir Claude, do not fully reveal their opinion of Ida to Maisie, or indeed serve as an explanation for Ida's outburst; however, these looks provide Maisie the space within which to consider that Ida's behaviour is, in fact, not related to her own, but that instead something 'beyond' Maisie's knowledge had taken place. Unexplained looks relieve Maisie's shame by casting doubt on Ida and in so doing trigger the growth of Maisie's knowledge about Ida and her relationships. The narrative goes on to detail how, following a second similar episode, Maisie realises that the shift in the domestic sphere that she could not 'know' is that Ida is no longer in love with Sir Claude (p. 61). The body in the novel acts as an ironic mirror which reflects, and in so doing exhibits, the relationship

between reading and style: the ways in which meaning can emerge reparatively through performances of style. In *What Maisie Knew*, style does not restore meaning but repairs it in a different sense in that it lends ‘freshness’ to the narrative. Maisie uses the reparative potential of style in order to read for the good, to open up meaning not to make it singular and transparent; this desire to make a situation ambiguous, and therefore herself and surrounding adults potentially loveable or morally good, is most noticeable in the conversations with her parents. The passage from *Emile* quoted earlier demonstrates Rousseau’s fear that the child will glimpse a world of hidden meaning through the subtle unconscious gestures of the adult body. *What Maisie Knew*, however, shows that this world of bodily signs is the child’s primary environment; an environment shaped by a poetics of deceit that does not corrupt the presumed “innocence” of the child as such, but instead encourages an understanding of the ethical and aesthetic value of deceit in relation to the role of style.<sup>134</sup>

In his Preface to *What Maisie Knew* James declares that ‘For nobody for whom life at large is *easily* interesting do the finer, the shyer, the more anxious small vibrations, fine and shy and anxious with the passion that precedes knowledge, succeed in being negligible’ (p. 10). Maisie’s world is composed solely of these shy, small vibrations: she searches the faces around her for changes in colour or expression that might expose an unconscious desire, a motive behind another character’s actions, before they become aware of it and act on it. Rousseau and James anticipate Freud’s focus on what the child knows and how she came to know whatever it is that she knows; specifically what the child knows of sex and the complex sexual relationships between surrounding adults. For these writers, the child holds the key to understanding ‘the passion that proceeds knowledge’. They all devise different methods of reading or narrating the valuable knowledge which the child in her naivety cannot convey.

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<sup>134</sup> In line with Rousseau’s thesis on the subject, secrecy seems to the adult characters in the novels to be totally incompatible with innocence. Maisie, however, brings secrecy and innocence together. Innocence in this novel does not mean free from corruption; instead Maisie is innocent in her ‘freshness’, her unending desire to repair the corruption which surrounds her and her unrelenting belief that this could be possible.

In his work on the similarities between Dora and Maisie, Neil Hertz suggests that both James and Freud ‘assume[s] there is some fund of knowledge there not immediately accessible but peculiarly worth the effort of translation.’<sup>135</sup> The case of Dora in Freud’s ‘Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria’ (1905), positions Freud, similarly to Rousseau and arguably also to both James and Maisie, as a reader and interpreter of bodily gestures. Like Maisie, Dora suffers from aphonia, or loss of voice; Maisie’s aphonia, however, is learnt and is consciously performed in order to protect herself from the vicious, duplicitous language of her parents. This rejection of spoken language leads to Maisie’s ardent focus on bodily gestures. Maisie, like Freud, observes the facial expressions of the adults around her for details that might betray hidden truths; as Rousseau fears ‘a smile, a wink, a careless gesture tells him all we sought to hide’. For James, however, the body is deceitful and often misread: it does not simply and seamlessly disclose hidden content.

These moments, at which reading fails, is unfinished or partial, characterise James’s childlike reading practice which, like Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutics of recollection’, forces the reader into a position where they have to read alongside Maisie’s truth games. Addressing the differences between *What Maisie Knew* and ‘Dora’, Philip Rieff also suggests that James supports Maisie’s ‘self-perpetuating truths’ and Freud, in contrast, denies Dora’s (and arguably Freud fails to recognise his own self-perpetuating truth games in this case).<sup>136</sup> I suggest that James is most interested in *how* Maisie’s truths become self-perpetuating: how the performativity of style enables self-perpetuating truth games. James demonstrates the value of these truth games: the ways in which they might have the power to repair; whereas Freud sees them only as destructive and evasive.

Unlike Rousseau’s Emile, who is unaware of the uses of deceit, James’s heroine learns to partake in the novel’s poetics of deceit. For Maisie, the realisation that she can deceive is

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<sup>135</sup> Neil Hertz, ‘Dora’s Secrets, Freud’s Techniques’, *In Dora’s Case: Freud – Hysteria – Feminism*, Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (eds.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) pp. 221-243, p. 222.

<sup>136</sup> Philip Rieff, *Fellow Teachers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) p. 84.

tied to the realisation that she has a private self. Maisie secretly employs the suspicious reading practice necessary to decode the conspiracies surrounding her, whilst simultaneously presenting a transparent surface which prevents her from being entered into this suspicious circuit of reading against her will. In her work on the problems and radical possibilities which inhere in the versions of transparency prevalent in contemporary discursive practices, Claire Birchall explains that transparency short-circuits other forms of disclosure such as scandal and gossip.<sup>137</sup> These forms of disclosure make up the texture of James's novels. Demonstrating both the ethical and aesthetic value of deceit, Maisie practices James's poetics of deceit with a reparative motive; she employs this style in order to fashion a version of sincerity that might make the lies of her parents (and substitute parent figures) performatively true. She does this in order to satisfy her emotional needs by attempting to redeem her parents whom she both loves and hates; but also, crucially, to achieve some independence from the vicious games her parents are playing. In the same way that she gains some sense of herself through keeping secrets, Maisie's truth games provide a way for her to take control of her reality.

As Rousseau anticipates, facial movements, subtle looks, tones of skin and voice initiate Maisie into a world of irony and double meanings; when Maisie is admiring the beauty of her governess, the then Miss Overmore proceeds to sow 'the seeds of secrecy ... by a mere roll of those fine eyes' (p. 19). Maisie becomes a formidable reader of 'the unmistakable language of a pair of eyes' (p. 20). Described as 'unmistakable', somatic language appears to transcend the interpretative struggles inherent to discourse. In line with Rousseau's fear of the body as a leaky vessel, this somatic language seems ultra-romanticised to the extent that it might promise a truly transparent, spontaneous and unmediated relationship with meaning. However, James's complicated intertwining of transparency and obfuscation details how this

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<sup>137</sup> Clare Birchall, 'Radical Transparency?', *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies*, 14:1 (2014) pp. 77-88, p. 77.

transparency works to sow ‘the seeds of secrecy’. Visceral exposure is exactly what Rousseau fears; however, for James, this somatic language leads to a necessarily contingent interpretative practice which empowers social interaction. Emotions ‘in their very intensity’, as Sara Ahmed explains, ‘involve miscommunication’<sup>138</sup> and the inscription of emotion on the skin ‘might not be as straightforwardly transparent as it at first appears: [the skin] is not simply a voice that speaks to us through the changes in its colour or its contours’.<sup>139</sup> Undermining the Romantic quest for transparency, this emotional somatic language comes to foreground the discursive mistakes and misunderstandings within the narrative. Maisie learns to embrace the potential of misreading – both in her style of reading and in her style of communication (the way she is read by others) – as a way of repairing the discursive and ethical failings that she is forced to confront. Childlike reading, then, is a version of reading attuned to the production of skins or surfaces and to the ways in which reading generates these surfaces.

Blushing denies a hermeneutic of suspicion its climax in what Sedgwick aptly describes as the ‘drama of exposure’.<sup>140</sup> The involuntary exposure of this form of uncontrollable hyperpigmentation renders a hermeneutic of suspicion impotent by revealing latent meaning on the surface. The method of ‘digging and hiding’ necessary for a hermeneutic of suspicion to function becomes irrelevant as everything rushes to the surface. There is, however, a doubleness inherent to the protean nature of the blush – a difficulty inherent to its apparent transparency. Though she engages in suspicious acts of reading, Maisie learns to read heuristically, by “trial and error”; this heuristic mode of reading is built on the failures that necessitate an oscillating movement between suspicion and reparation. *What Maisie Knew* “grows” like a blush through embracing the structuring capacity of shame.

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<sup>138</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2012) p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, ‘Introduction: dermatographies,’ *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2001) pp. 1-19, p. 8.

<sup>140</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 8.

The novel's sentimental yet satirical hermeneutics of blushing – both suspicious and reparative – is attuned to decoding delicate emotional impressions, and as such enables its heroine to develop an experiential type of knowledge facilitated by the valence and intensity of shame. Such a knowledge dissolves the superficial dualistic boundaries binding innocence and guilt, and reconnects the concepts with the creative shades of embarrassment they both provoke.

With its infectious nature and 'circulatory success', the blush becomes a metaphor for the reparative potential of style. Kurnick suggests that Jamesian style wants to substitute the focus on revealing individual subjectivity (what Kurnick terms 'the drama of consciousness') for a vision of 'collectivity and universalism' which could reduce the distance between one mind and another. He explains that 'this vision of collectivity proceeds from a stylistic sharing among characters' facilitated by the joint 'circulatory success' of metaphor and style in James's late works.<sup>141</sup> Exploring Rousseau's conception of the relationship between this 'drama of consciousness' and an essential, immutable human nature Jean Starobinski explains that, for Rousseau, collectivity and universalism are not understood through style but, instead can only be achieved by crossing 'interior distance': 'a distance soon traversed by a man who knows how to abandon himself to his emotions ... transparency is an inward condition, a matter of one's relation to oneself'.<sup>142</sup> For James, abandonment in emotion is not a transparent process but, instead, sets in motion a crucially contingent sequence of misreadings. Performances of emotional transparency cannot transcend the vicissitudes of reading. Instead, collapsing 'interior distance' becomes, for James, an aesthetic project: in the end, distance can only be traversed by style and even then, not completely. Indeed, Kurnick concludes his argument by suggesting that despite forging

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<sup>141</sup> David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) p. 146.

<sup>142</sup> Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 19.

a vision of stylistic collectivity, 'James wants to stress that difference ultimately vanquishes the text's palpable stylistic universalism'.<sup>143</sup>

My claim is that the performativity of style only works within a frame; this frame is figured by James as a game: a contained space governed by a strict rubric. I suggest that James is interested in why this frame inevitably breaks down and the shame and frustration that occurs when it does. It is through the formalism of the game – in which every outcome is predetermined and options are limited in accordance with the necessary adherence to the forms prescribed by the rules of the game – that style becomes performative and enacts the rules of the game; in doing this, style produces meaning and truth. In his Preface to *The Awkward Age* James describes writing in this way as a game: 'I saw the point of my game all in the problem of keeping these conditioned relations crystalline at the same time that I should, in emulation of life, consent to their being numerous and fine and characteristic of the London world ... All of which was to make in the event for complications.'<sup>144</sup> This explanation shows James's struggle to maintain the game of transparency, in which the events and motives of the novel are crystallised, whilst creating a novel capable of representing the subtleties and resulting complexities of his subject. Transparency is impossible because the borders of the novel, its frame, cannot be maintained: 'though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what make such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture.'<sup>145</sup> Human intersubjective connections are limitless; the author, then, plays a game which involves framing and delimiting them. James describes this picture as a sort of jigsaw puzzle: 'all the pieces of the game on the table together and each unconfusedly and contributively

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<sup>143</sup> Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, p. 152.

<sup>144</sup> James, Preface to *The Awkward Age*, p. xliii.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

placed'.<sup>146</sup> He continues to clarify that this scientific approach to novel writing cannot be maintained; the limits of the game break down resulting in productive misreadings.

The game is often employed as a model for the relationship between writing and reading. As Deleuze explicates, the game is a model for the suspicious reader who tries to limit and in so doing predict the options for problems; to force these options into transparency.<sup>147</sup> Transparency emerges in *What Maisie Knew* as the ideal version of simplicity – a supreme transcendent simplicity that promises a direct relation to essential truths and as such allows no room for the multiplicity of misreading. If, as *What Maisie Knew* seems to propose, this transparency is imaginary, and all transparency is in fact performance, then transparency becomes just another method for adding layers of opacity. *What Maisie Knew* exposes transparency as a beguiling strategy for obfuscation which denies the need for an interpretative practice, and functions, paradoxically, by relying upon the consequent difficulties of interpretation and response it then provokes. This sort of transparent-suspicious game exists in tension with childlike reading: a model for reading that more closely resembles the innocent or pure game which invites participation, failure and difficulty. Interpretative difficulty challenges the limits of the game, provoking the disintegration of meaning and giving rise to misreading. Maisie tries continuously to make adult rhetoric true by taking advantage of this interpretative difficulty and creating innocent replacement games to harness the performativity of style.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. xxxii.

<sup>147</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 59. The innocent or pure game, in contrast, is not a transparent game but a game without rules. Maisie's truth games are pure games, then, to the extent that they create *events* through which her thoughts might become real and disturb 'reality, morality, and the economy of [her] world.' (Ibid., p. 60).

## 2.2. Toy Words and Truth Games

Games become a system of tropes for James; they are metaphors or images which directly engage with both the composition of novels and the processes of interpretation. These interpretative games make words into toys which can be used as tools, played with and manipulated. Gradually Maisie learns how to deal with these toys words:

she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable – images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play. The great strain was that of carrying by the right end the things her father said about her mother – things mostly indeed that Moddle, on a glimpse of them, as if they had been complicated toys or difficult books, took out of her hands and put away in the closet. A wonderful assortment of objects of this kind she was to discover there later, all tumbled up too with the things, shuffled into the same receptacle, that her mother had said about her father. (pp. 16-17).

Games and toys in the novel, then, are not objects through which the child's relationship with the world becomes transparent; instead they elicit complex, contradictory feelings in Maisie. Throughout the novel games are used as metaphors for the difficulties of interpretation: Maisie watches her father's laughter which 'seemed always, like some trick in a frightening game' (p. 27); the fraught relationship between Maisie, Miss Overmore, and Maisie's parents 'seemed to make them cling together as in some wild game of 'going-round'' (p. 20); 'each parent would try to make the little girl a burden to the other – a sort of game' (p. 21); the behaviour of Maisie's parents is again described as 'a game like another, and Mrs Wix's visit was clearly the first move in it' (p. 37). Despite the interpretative difficulties that these game metaphors provoke, the adults surrounding Maisie also often use games to explain things to her. Detailing to Maisie the situation unfolding between her step-parents 'Mrs Wix had helped her by talking of a game; it was a connection in which the move could put on a strategic air' (p. 180); "'It's her ladyship's game, and we must hold on like grim

death.” Maisie could interpret at her leisure these ominous words. Her reflections indeed at this moment thickened apace.’ (p. 60). These game metaphors give Maisie an impression of the competitive manipulation that marks adult behaviour in the novel, while at the same time the burdensome ambiguity of this language of metaphors works to spur on Maisie’s creative reading practices.

Game metaphors bring Maisie’s childlike interpretative practice to the fore, illustrating the ways in which Maisie conceptualises both discursive and extra-discursive instances she cannot yet clearly interpret. She reads adult bodies through her childlike metaphorical rubric; faces like words are understood by comparison with toys: ‘eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes’ (p. 25). Adult behaviour and discourse are described as games with a set of instructions to which Maisie does not have access. As a result, the objects to which her reading practice is directed are always rendered indistinct; the discourse of Maisie’s parents is, for example, at first a ‘game[s] she wasn’t yet big enough to play’. The language that Maisie could not clearly interpret as an infant is stored away in her mind like ‘complicated toys or difficult books’, and as her understanding grows she rediscovers these ‘images and echoes to which meanings were attachable’. When no longer an infant, Maisie begins to interpret this store of ‘images and echoes’. What exactly these images look like is left ambiguous for the reader, but by referring to them as held in the pre-symbolic darkness of childhood ignorance, in ‘the childish dusk, the dim *close*’, the narrative implies that these images are of a sexual nature. The narrative binds sexual knowledge to language by demonstrating that, for Maisie, sexual knowledge develops through interaction with toy words and truth games.

Maisie is shuttled back and forth between her parents proper and her substitute parents, her movements governed by the novel’s systems of exchange and substitution; an oppositional game is set in motion from the beginning of the novel – each side acts and reacts provoking an equal and opposite reaction, this then takes the form of a symmetrical

series of replacement partners. As a result, Maisie's knowledge of sex is joined to this system of exchange. Sir Claude disappears for long periods of time and when he returns he presents Mrs Wix and Maisie with gifts to compensate them for his absence: he brings them 'ever so many games in boxes, with printed directions

... The games were, as he said, to while away the evening hour; and the evening hour indeed often passed in futile attempts on Mrs Wix's part to master what 'it said' on the papers. When he asked the pair how they liked the games they always replied, 'Oh, immensely!' but they had earnest discussions as to whether they had better appeal to him frankly for aid to understand them. This was a course their delicacy shrank from; they couldn't have told exactly why, but it was a part of their tenderness for him not to let him think they had trouble. ... The answer on the winter nights to the puzzle of cards and counters and little bewildering pamphlets was just to draw up to the fire and talk about him; and if the truth must be told this edifying interchange constituted for the time the little girl's chief education. (pp. 50-51).

This board game scene acts as a microcosm for the game-like systems of exchange that operate throughout the novel with Maisie at their centre. Maisie and Mrs Wix are often excluded from participating as players in the sexual politics of the structured oppositional games of Maisie's parents and step-parents. However, the structural integrity of these games disintegrates as characters continually misread or fail to master the rules of the game, operating rhetorically and physically in narrative forms that extend beyond the borders of the game; both Ida and Beale do this in their excessive grandstanding when they attempt to abandon Maisie and it is in this display of excess that Maisie perceives the limits of their games. As a result, Maisie engineers other games, reparative games of style, to replace these brittle, rigidly-structured games.

Maisie's reparative impulse emerges as a necessary corollary to the development of her sexual knowledge; it is romantic admiration of Sir Claude that takes the place of these oppositional games. In this board game scene, transparency regarding Maisie's inability to play the games is perceived as a coarse and vulgar action that, instead of clarity, would lead to clumsiness between her, Mrs Wix and Sir Claude. As a result, instead of transparent

truthfulness, Maisie saves the embarrassment of both Mrs Wix and Sir Claude by creating a reparative aesthetic through a poetics of deceit, one which will disguise the ‘vulgar’ sexual implications of systems of exchange. Her truth game, which takes the form of performed enthusiasm, is an acceptance of Sir Claude’s gift in a way that prevents the unsymmetrical messiness of admitting she and Mrs Wix could not understand the instructions and had not in fact played the game. Maisie’s lie – that she enjoyed the games immensely – is not altogether untrue: the pair’s inability to interpret the instructions for the board game opens the way for other edifying forms of exchange. Maisie replaces the physical board games with a truth game which works in tandem with another replacement game: unstructured collaborative play with Mrs Wix in the form of fantastic storytelling starring Sir Claude.

To Maisie ‘all stories are true and all conceptions are stories’ (p. 18); stories act as truth games and it is through these stories that Maisie, like James, shapes what is true. The gossiping that takes the form of storytelling is a replacement game: a truth game in the form of a narrative mode of disclosure prohibited by the prevailing logic of the transparency of childhood but given weight here as a version of play that reproduces the performative register of the narrative. Maisie’s impulse to repair is the grace that becomes the unassimilable remainder in the giving and receiving of her relationships. This reparative move only becomes available in the adoption of a poetics of deceit operating within the borders of a truth game.

As the novel progresses and Maisie’s reading of her situation in relation to the sexual politics which govern it becomes increasingly sophisticated she begins to engage with these games as a fellow player: Maisie and Sir Claude talk to each other ‘as if they were playing a game’ (p. 56). Maisie’s understanding of these novelistic truth games, then, enables her to participate in a Jamesian poetics of deceit. As previously explored in relation to Maisie’s exchange with her father Beale, Maisie perceives her interactions with surrounding adults as truth games; she creates these truth games to harness the reparative potential of the

performativity of style and in so doing make the lies of the surrounding adults performatively true. Maisie applies this strategy not solely to participate in these adult games – to repair the lies of her parents and to create the conditions in which her parents could be loveable – but also to create her own lies which she uses as a method for preventing the guilt or awkwardness of surrounding adults; this strategy is most apparent in Maisie’s interactions with Sir Claude because it is him that she desperately wants to ‘save’, his redemption is a pivotal element of her romantic narrative. Following her encounter with her mother’s new partner, the Captain, in which Maisie has an uncharacteristically frank conversation about Ida’s partners, Maisie is interrogated by Sir Claude, who demands information about the mysterious character. The ensuing exchange between Sir Claude and Maisie is fraught; he asks Maisie

‘Well, who in the world is the fellow?’

She felt herself flooded with prudence. ‘Oh *I* haven’t found out!’ This sounded as if she meant he ought to have done so himself; but she could only face doggedly the ugliness of seeming disagreeable, as she used to face it in the hours when her father, for her blankness, called her a dirty little donkey, and her mother, for her falsity, pushed her out of the room.

‘Then what have you been doing all this time?’

‘Oh I don’t know!’ It was the essence of her method not to be silly by halves.

...

Sir Claude, smoking rather hard, made no immediate rejoinder; but finally he exclaimed: ‘Then my dear – with such a chance – you were the perfection of a dunce!’ ...

Nothing of this kind had ever yet happened to them, but it had no power to make her love him less; so she could not only bear it, she felt as she drove away – she could rejoice in it. It brought the sweet sense of success that, ages before, she had had at a crisis when, on the stairs, returning from her father’s, she had met a fierce question of her mother’s with an imbecility as deep and had in consequence been dashed by Mrs Farange almost to the bottom. (pp. 98-99).

In these conversational games the stakes are high for Maisie; in her experience, failure often results in physical or emotional abuse. Conversation always becomes a game which Maisie seeks to participate in not only to make communication beautiful in its truthfulness on the

level of style, but as a matter of survival. She has learnt not to attempt to seek the “truth” in the discourse and interpersonal relationships of surrounding adults; in Maisie’s experience moments of genuine communication are extremely rare. Maisie learns to practice a Jamesian poetics of deceit with a reparative motive through her understanding of the performativity of style and the corresponding aesthetic and moral imperatives that can cohere within the segregated space of the game of interpretation. She expects that the unreality of the truth game will provide the conditions for the redemption of her parents. Maisie uses the reparative potential of the performativity of style to attempt to create both aesthetic and ethical symmetry; she ties beauty to truth and morality, believing as a result that she might make these interactions moral by creating beautiful symmetry. She can only face the ‘ugliness of seeming disagreeable’ because she is certain that her silence is necessary in order to ensure the greater symmetrical integrity, and thus morality, of her parents’ and substitute parents’ relationships.

In order to satisfy her emotional needs, Maisie enters into adult games and attempts to redeem them by making language true at the level of style. When, in close succession, Maisie’s parents relinquish any responsibility for her care Maisie attempts to create truth games which might work to support their grandstanding. In response to Sir Claude’s questioning, Maisie’s truth game takes the form of a performance of ignorance; however, in these crucial moments with her parents Maisie attempts a version of the truth game that will make the absurd proclamations of her parents true. This more complex truth game ultimately fails with both parents because it requires their participation. Claiming that she is terribly ill and must, therefore, go to South Africa to recover her health, it emerges that Ida intends to make Sir Claude solely responsible for Maisie’s care; we discover, of course, that neither parent is actually relocating to a faraway country. Whilst underhandedly suggesting Maisie has the option to come with her Ida continually shuts down this possibility with her verbal bombardment of Maisie: ‘It was the mark of Ida’s eloquence that she started more hares than

she followed, and she gave but a glance in the direction of this one' (p. 135). Like Beale, Ida intends to abandon Maisie whilst cultivating an appearance of virtue. Maisie understands that Ida is, in fact, abandoning her, however their conversation is still wrought by misreadings: Maisie 'only wanted, by playing into her visitor's hands, to see the thing through. But her impatience itself made at instants the whole situation swim; there were things Ida said that she perhaps didn't hear, and there were things she heard that Ida perhaps didn't say.' (p. 135). Similarly to the corresponding scene with Beale, Maisie desperately attempts to make the conversation with Ida easy and graceful.

While she hopes to make her abandonment as swift as possible, Maisie still wants to spare her mother any guilt; she, therefore, breaks her practiced silence to support her mother's view of herself as 'too good': 'Maisie's desire to show what justice she did her had by this time become so intense as to have brought with it an inspiration.' In her desire to make Ida's proclamation of her own goodness true, Maisie forgets that 'she had never been safe unless she had also been stupid'. She ventures to tell her mother that the Captain supports this same view that Ida has of herself. Tension builds as Ida, then, demands to know what the Captain has said:

Maisie faltered supremely, but supremely she brought it out, 'What you say, mamma – that you're so good.'

'What "I" say?' Ida slowly rose, keeping her eyes on her child, and the hand that had busied itself in her purse confirmed at her side and amid the folds of her dress to a certain stiffening of the arm. 'I say you're a precious idiot, and I won't have you put words in my mouth!' This was much more peremptory than a mere contradiction. Maisie could only feel on the spot that everything had broken short off and that their communication had abruptly ceased. That was presently proved. 'What business have you to speak to me of him?' (p. 137).

The Captain's claim about Ida is performatively effective for Maisie's belief in her mother; however, it falls apart here as Ida now hates him. In this conversation, as in the corresponding one with her father, the outcome of the situation is determined by a series of

misreadings. Maisie uses silences, lies by omission, nonresponse, and other nonverbal techniques to maintain the opacity that is her interiority: using the generative potential of misreading to substantiate her selfhood. Moments like this, in which Maisie seeks to participate openly in the dialogue, endanger her sense of self through exposing her feelings about, and her knowledge of, the situation. Communication with her parents is a delicate game in which knowledge of love, sex and money must always remain just beneath the surface. Maisie wants to save her relationships with her parents from the strain of awkwardness, or even the threat of violence, while simultaneously making her parents “good” by supporting their own assertions about their morality. This scene mirrors the corresponding scene in which Beale also abandons Maisie; Maisie, then, finds herself trapped by the immorality of the novel’s aesthetic demands for a formal symmetry. She wants to make this interaction with her mother into a truth game in which she can square – make moral and beautiful – her own abandonment by joining in with Ida’s lie about moving to South Africa, making Ida’s actions ethically acceptable and her desire to be freed to the care of Sir Claude somehow the most symmetrically just outcome.

As Maisie gradually begins to understand that words can be used metaphorically, like toys, as tools within truth games, she realises that attempting to square the circle of language is a futile act. Maisie’s earnest attempts to engage with Ida linguistically only serve to prove to Maisie that language is irredeemable. Squaring people in *What Maisie Knew* is always an illusion; the adults use the ambiguous phrase to dismiss Maisie’s concerns by suggesting to her that an unfair situation has been settled and reparations have been made; Sir Claude is the first to use the phrase (p. 73) and Maisie repeats it with glee (p. 85). The register of squaring in the novel, and Maisie’s preoccupation with this idea, suggests compensation for the faults of the adults – making things ethical, fair or just – and creates the symmetry that Maisie so desires. The novel itself, instead, relates squaring with immorality and demonstrates that any beauty is in the irreparability of games. In work on the reoccurring concept of

‘squaring’ in *What Maisie Knew*, Barbara Eckstein suggests that as the novel progresses and the immorality of squaring becomes increasingly clear, ‘James’s impulses toward formalist symmetry become objects of his own attack.’<sup>148</sup> Maisie, still trapped by the novel’s formalist symmetry, finds herself rapidly becoming the victim of its disintegration. Ultimately, the ethical motive trumps the aesthetic for Maisie; Jamesian style, however, wants to use her reparative performances for aesthetic or formal purposes and epistemological experiments. The tension between these two uses is productive; for James the beauty of this novel exists in the breakdown of Maisie’s truth games. Jamesian style works by acknowledging the texts’ self-perpetuating autophagy: the ways in which the reparative impulse arises out of failure or dysfunction and, for Maisie, out of abuse and shame. As the immorality of squaring becomes increasingly apparent, beauty is shown not to be in a formalist symmetry but, instead, in the irreparability of games; readers are, then, encouraged to read alongside these failed games and Maisie’s attempts at reparation (her various replacement truth games). Maisie is at once tortured by the novel’s formalist symmetry and by its disintegration. Participating in the narrative by reading alongside Maisie, we as readers become both the torturer and the tortured; as a result, we are forced to reflect on what we want the narrative to allow us to know.

Maisie’s childlike reading, aware of the context of ethical judgements and attuned to linguistic opacity, cannot produce the symmetrical clarity that she at first desires. Referring to the novel as a game, Eckstein explains that, as a result of her growing awareness of the limitations of aesthetic or moral symmetry, Maisie learns ‘to maintain relationships over and above the rules of a game or established objective principle’.<sup>149</sup> At the end of the novel, Sir Claude and Mrs Beale turn to Maisie to redeem their infidelity and secure the moral integrity of their relationship; this redemption, however, is only ever for the sake of surfaces, to design

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<sup>148</sup> Barbara Eckstein, ‘Unsquaring the Squared Root of *What Maisie Knew*,’ *HJR*, 9:3 (1988) pp.177-187, p. 177.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

an illusion of propriety. Maisie refuses to be a tool for squaring Sir Claude and Mrs Beale's relationship or making it appear appropriate.<sup>150</sup>

The danger of Maisie's contextual judgements, of her reparative impulse to maintain relationships outside of the squaring game of her parents is, as Eckstein puts it, 'excessive self-abnegation.'<sup>151</sup> Building on Eckstein's analysis of squaring, I suggest that, faced with the continuous failure of symmetry to generate comprehensible beauty, redeem language and maintain the integrity of the truths she creates, Maisie attempts to supersede these game models by substantiating her selfhood, instead, through the mistakes of others. When she refuses to relay any information gleaned from her conversation with the Captain to Sir Claude, Maisie experiences the same pleasure she felt as a younger child refusing to recite messages from one parent to another. The interpretative mistakes of those around her are both caused by her secrets and become in themselves her secrets. She knows who she is through her secrets; they 'sustain her, keep her separate, make her self-aware'.<sup>152</sup> Instead of the simplistic order of the game, Maisie relies on the generative muddle to establish a sense of interiority. In secrets, misreadings and truth games, Maisie is able to cultivate selfhood without the coherence and symmetry provided by the game model of opposition or conflict that sustains the other characters in the novel; as a result, she develops a mode of reading formed through child's play that is generous and uncompetitive.

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<sup>150</sup> Marotta, in contrast, proposes that the novel wants to redeem language, to free it from corruption and reunite it with reality; he makes this argument by in turn trying hard to redeem Sir Claude's character by concentrating on his final act of giving Maisie away to Mrs Wix, an act through which, he suggests, Maisie 'regains her faith in the connection of words and truth' or language and reality ('The Question of Our Speech,' p. 503). His suggestion seems to imply that by maintaining the integrity of the limits of the game through adhering to a formalist symmetry which governs the morality of the novel (the characters' ethical judgements) language might be redeemed. However, Sir Claude's decision, to cement the final couplings (Maisie and Mrs Wix; Sir Claude and Mrs Beale) – if it is even his decision and not Maisie's – produces an artificial, discomfiting symmetry that does not appear to be the most just or happy outcome for anyone involved.

<sup>151</sup> Eckstein, 'Unsquaring the Squared Root of *What Maisie Knew*,' p. 182.

<sup>152</sup> This quotation is taken from Don DeLillo's *Libra*, talking about his daughter, Win Everett, a chief conspirator in the plot to assassinate President Kennedy, muses that secrets are 'a way of arresting motion, stopping the world so we can see ourselves in it. ... My little girl is generous with her secrets. I wish she weren't, frankly. Don't secrets sustain her, keep her separate, make her self-aware? How can she know who she is if she gives away her secrets?' (Don DeLillo, *Libra* (London: Penguin, 2011) p. 26).

### 2.3. Secrecy and Self-making in Doll-play

The news that her mother will be leaving, and this time never coming back, releases Maisie from the oppressive symmetry of her parents' relationships; she responds to the loss of her mother by secretly cultivating a new future for herself. Analysing the play of his grandson in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud shows how the child gains some mastery over unpleasant experiences through repeating and enacting these experiences in the form of a game. In order to understand and take control of his feelings about his mother's departure the child throws away his toy uttering a loud 'o-o-o-o' which represented the German word for gone, 'fort'. In the complete game the child pulls back the toy and utters 'da' or 'there'; 'fort', however, is also often played as a game in itself. Freud interprets the game as 'the child's great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation ... which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting.'<sup>153</sup> This game, then, is a form of compensation and reward. Freud suggests that this game might be a way of transforming the child's role from passive to active participant. He then takes this further, speculating on whether the child might be enacting revenge upon the mother – a desire and course of action suppressed in his actual life out of necessity.<sup>154</sup> Freud's essay abandons this example of child's play without an answer; he is left in doubt as to whether repeating an overpowering experience in order to master it 'can find expression as a primary event, and independently of the pleasure principle'.<sup>155</sup> In contrast to this famous model for establishing selfhood in the face of traumatic experiences, Maisie harnesses the potential of others' mistakes; she does not substantiate her selfhood through repetitive, enacted games but actively intervenes in adult discourse, harnessing silences and misreadings in order to create truth games which

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<sup>153</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XVIII (1920-1922)*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001) pp. 7-64, p. 15.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

might repair the actual situation. This reparative reading practice produces a reality in which Maisie can play the role of parent and make both herself and her parents' loveable within the love story she has created featuring herself and Sir Claude.

Maisie is not able to attend school and has no friends her own age; it is arguably part of her abuse that she has only adults for company. As a result, for a novel with a child protagonist there are surprisingly few examples of playing; Maisie's replacement games are more like adult games of interpretation in which she attempts to square the circle of language. There are, however, revealing moments when Maisie plays with her doll Lisette. This imaginative play is a more sophisticated version of the fort/da game; it is not a self-enclosed game but is instead a form of role play, a microcosmic representation of Maisie's own performance. Maisie comes to understand more about her situation and her coping mechanisms through enacting them with Lisette: 'enlightened by Lisette's questions, which reproduced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in the very darkness of Lisette. Was she not herself convulsed by such innocence? ... There were at any rate things she couldn't tell even a French doll.' (p. 29). Lisette becomes a figure for Maisie herself; a way for Maisie to enact, and in so doing, to work through her own innocence, ignorance or knowledge. Lisette's innocence reflects Maisie's own epistemophilia – her desperate desire for knowledge of the self, which is also here knowledge of her origins and sexuality.<sup>156</sup>

Maisie imbues Lisette with consciousness and a desire for knowledge from the position of eager observer, a position which clearly resembles Maisie's own. Maisie gains mastery and reinforces her selfhood through keeping secrets from Lisette in the same way that she feels the surrounding adults are hiding things from her (the hidden being the sexual

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<sup>156</sup> In 'A Contribution to the Theory of Intellectual Inhibition' (1931) Klein develops the epistemophilic instinct introduced by Freud in his analysis of Little Hans ('Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy' (1909)) – the child's instinct to know about his/her own origins and thus about sexuality. Klein suggests that this instinct becomes an aggressive desire to get inside (and destroy) the mother's body ('A Contribution to the Theory of Intellectual Inhibition, *Love, Guilt, Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Virago Press, 1988) pp. 236-248, p. 238). Being able to conceive of the inside of the mother's body, then, results in 'a greater capacity to take in knowledge'. (Ibid., p. 244).

implications or sexual politics of the repeated adult absences): 'There were, for instance, days when, after prolonged absence, Lisette, watching her take off her things, tried hard to discover where she had been. Well, she discovered a little, but never discovered all. ... She mimicked her mother's sharpness, but she was rather ashamed afterwards, though as to whether of the sharpness or the mimicry was not quite clear.' (p. 29). This sequence of mirroring allows for a causal symmetry; the reflective symmetry is a way for Maisie both to 'square' her mother's behaviour and to reverse the power positions. Maisie understands and masters her position through enacting it; projecting her position onto her doll and adopting the characteristics of her mother contributes to her reparative reading practice. By repeating these positions of power and powerlessness, the play acts as a mirror through which Maisie can simultaneously witness her own position and occupy her mother's position of power. Like the child playing fort/da, Maisie uses this repetitive mirroring to gain mastery; however, in Maisie's play the toy is not the mother but a mirror image of Maisie's passive position, on which Maisie enacts her frustrations. The figure of the doll as a totally passive child represents the child player (Maisie) whilst simultaneously asking the child to play the role of mother to the doll. In this way the doll scripts the behaviour of the child; however, as Bernstein suggests, child's play often transforms these scripts. In place of a nurturing mother, Maisie uses the doll to perform the torturing of childhood innocence that she herself has experienced – both in an oppressive reading of what Lisette knows and by interpreting Lisette's passivity as a quiet attempt to read her. Maisie's epistemophilia – which she comes to perceive through projecting it onto Lisette – becomes the focus of her sadomasochistic interactions with the doll.

Games of innocence and games of deceit are not clearly differentiated in the novel. Even this example of Maisie's play with Lisette causes complex feelings to arise in Maisie as she works to substantiate her selfhood – her separateness from her mother – through a version of deceit, secrecy, or lying by omission. Maisie's play with Lisette causes her to feel

shame; the narrative casts doubt on whether this shame is related to the content of the play, the 'sharpness' of her mode of addressing Lisette, or the form of the play itself, that of mimicry. Mimicry is arguably an inherently comic and insincere form of representation which is in tension with the seriousness of Maisie's play in a way that emphasises the artifice of the symmetry that she seeks.

James, like Maisie, takes the ugly sexual politics of adult games and uses them ironically to compose an aesthetically and formally beautiful narrative. In his Preface to *What Maisie Knew* James explains that the beauty of the novel resides in its successful expression of the child's values: 'Truly, I reflect, if the theme had had no other beauty it would still have had this rare and distinguished one of its so expressing the variety of the child's values.' (p. 8). It is the depiction of the multivalence of Maisie's values and her attempts to realise them that produces the novel's beauty; the way that Maisie tries to repair vulgar or crude adult games using the graceful truth games she creates only to see these games fail. The novel, then, traces the shame that drives Maisie's reparative motive and causes the repetition of this process. The irreparability and muddledness of failed games of interpretation at once feed and disrupt the novel's stylistic sharing and, in so doing, demonstrate the aesthetic value of deceit. The games of interpretation that reoccur throughout the novel follow a repeated pattern of failure, misreading, being repaired and then failing again; style is both the glue that holds this pattern together and the cause of the interpretative failures which perpetuate this pattern. Jamesian style wants to make reparations for the irreparability of the novel's games of interpretation and for the problem of torturing children with reading in this way. The consistency of stylistic sharing within the novel compensates the reader for any interpretative difficulty; however, even this universality of style breaks down causing misreadings within the narrative which are often responsible for generating the direction of the plot, demonstrated for example in Ida's and Beale's abandonment of Maisie. Nevertheless, in the same way that Maisie responds to Sir Claude's board game, failures of interpretation are never

complete as the style, in its complexity, moves the novel on to other reparative games by encouraging a childlike reading practice which might read alongside these failures.

Jamesian style mimics Maisie's 'freshness', taking something ugly and rearranging it within a new frame:

noting what she does by her 'freshness' for appearances in themselves vulgar and empty enough. They become, as she deals with them, the stuff of poetry and tragedy and art; she simply has to wonder, as I say, about them, and they begin to have meanings, aspects, solidities, connections – connections with the 'universal' (p. 8).

This declaration about the child's relationship to art transforms the child into a figure, not just of the ideal Jamesian reader, but also of the ideal writer. The child's mind is given value in that it can allow the reader and writer a sense of meaning-in-the-making; but more than that this statement characterises the child's knowledge as essential and thus universal, a repository for a pure self.<sup>157</sup> James seems to be suggesting that through the child's knowledge we might transcend context to access a universally accessible style, a level of meaning beyond interpretative difficulty; a style which, as Kurnick notes, appears to move seamlessly throughout James's novels in 'stylistic sharing' and a consistent system of tropes. Nevertheless, James explains that Maisie comes to resist the narrative voice and with it this stylistic sharing – which is tied up with the games of interpretation produced by the novel and from which she is often excluded – forming new styles of knowing:

instead of simply submitting to the inherited tie and the imposed complication, of suffering from them, our little wonder-working agent would create, without design, quite fresh elements of this order – contribute, that is, to the formation of a fresh tie, from which it would then (and for all the world as if through a small demonic foresight) proceed to derive great profit. (p. 5).

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<sup>157</sup> Laing, 'What Maisie Knew: Nineteenth-Century Selfhood in the Mind of the Child,' p. 99. Laing discusses *What Maisie Knew* in relation to the late nineteenth-century Child Study movement (which included writers such as G. Stanley Hall and James Sully) which aimed to access a pure uncorrupted self through revealing the "innocent" knowledge of the child; I am arguing here that James is trapping the reader in this project, not embarking upon it himself.

Stylistic sharing is in tension with Maisie's primary mode of self-development in the secret conceit of her truth games. James claims here that, instead of succumbing to an imposed order, Maisie makes fresh connections, a new order or style of knowing in the form of self-regulating, self-perpetuating truth games through her freshness – an erroneous innocence of interpretation that wavers between suspicion and reparation. This is James at his most idealistic; however, there is, even here in his explicit enthusiasm, a sense that he is already creating a distance between this idealistic universal style and the realities of writing. Maisie is hopeful that through her abandonment by Beale and Ida she will be able to create a 'fresh tie' with Sir Claude; at the end of the novel, however, the demanding reality of pre-existing ties prevents any utopian newness. The novel demonstrates that the profit which Maisie derives from her truth games is not that she manages to redeem her parents, or create the fresh symmetry that she desires, but that she achieves selfhood through the misreadings that occur as a result of these truth games. *What Maisie Knew* then marks the beginning of James's late style, a style that is not reparative in itself but which provokes, through its syntactical and narrative difficulties, a reparative reading practice.

The voice of James's 'New York Prefaces', tinged with shame, performs a reparative reading of the works of a younger James. In so doing the voice of the Prefaces replicates the idealistic Romanticism of the vision of the writer as child. Sedgwick proposes that the older, more mature voice of the Prefaces returning to earlier works as adult critic infantilises the younger writer.<sup>158</sup> This same world-weary cynicism, tinged with humorous admiration, is applied to the idea of the novel as a game. The naive younger James is characterised, in the Preface to *The Awkward Age* in particular, as mentioned earlier, as valiantly attempting to bracket off aesthetic space in order to create the perfect aesthetic structure; the voice of the Preface contrasts itself with the novelist in its insistence that those limits cannot be

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<sup>158</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 39.

maintained. Whether Maisie acts as a figure for James himself has been a concern that has received a substantial amount of critical attention. The breaching of the formal space of the novel is, in some ways, brought on by the voice of the Preface, which identifies James the writer with the figure of the child. Providing a psychoanalytic reading of *What Maisie Knew* in comparison with Freud's Dora case, Hertz suggests that the relationship between Dora and Freud is not one of simple unidirectional transference from Dora to Freud but 'unrecognized' identification with Dora on Freud's part; he extends this to argue that James identifies with Maisie in the same way.<sup>159</sup> Similarly exploring this identification with the child, Ohi reads Maisie, not as a figure for James himself, but as a figure for James's method; he argues that *What Maisie Knew* 'connects such a desiring identification with a child (and its impossibility) to its own project of novelistic representation'.<sup>160</sup> Representation, then, becomes about the desire to read the child; the child in turn acts as a model, not for the writer but for the ideal reader as the struggle to read the child is converted into an identificatory childlike reading practice.

In work on *What Maisie Knew*, Juliet Mitchell argues that, as a result of Maisie's inability to participate in the games of the surrounding adults, she becomes an observer, a reader, and it is through this role that she transforms, by the end of the novel, into an artist: 'Her move is possible because she comes to see the game in which she is caught up. Her final knowledge is the knowledge of the expert's rejection of the game.'<sup>161</sup> Mitchell suggests that Maisie achieves this position through silence, which acts, she writes, as a 'place of retreat from the game, a game in which words are always hurled.'<sup>162</sup> I propose that Maisie never manages to free herself from the games of the adults that surround her; her life continues to

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<sup>159</sup> Hertz, 'Dora's Secrets, Freud's Techniques', p. 225.

<sup>160</sup> Ohi, 'Narrating the Child's Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*', p. 84.

<sup>161</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 'What Maisie Knew: The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl,' *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, John Goode (ed.) (London: Methuen & Co., 1972) pp. 168-190, p. 117.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 180. For other work that discusses Maisie as a figure for James himself see Susan Honeyman and John Carlos Rowe.

be shaped by her desire to participate in these games and to forge a place for herself in the symmetry that these games demand. She does, however, perform a sort of self-splitting through which she can observe these adult games, learn about them and use them to authenticate her selfhood by creating her own replacement truth games which often revolve around Sir Claude. This method of self-splitting provides her with the internal resources to participate in the adult games in her own way; nevertheless, the adults in the novel (Beale, Ida, Mrs Beale, Sir Claude and Mrs Wix) often fail to meet her level of tacit repair. Maisie cannot simply achieve the status of autonomous artist or figure for James himself by the end of the novel; the decision she makes to remain with Mrs Wix is the discomfiting result of the oppressive symmetry of the novel. Although Maisie engages with the Jamesian method of harnessing the performativity of style, the beauty of the novel exists in the tension between James's style and Maisie's style – or the way the character and author use style differently and for, at points, divergent purposes; Maisie wishes to repair and James provokes this same impulse in the reader by making style work to enflame interpretative difficulties.

Creating space for misreading through interpretative difficulty allows for a playful reparative reading practice that can adapt inherited scripts and produce new styles of knowing. Maisie is not, as Mitchell and Rowe have suggested, an intentional artist. Although Maisie creates replacement games in the form of truth games which produce coherent morals and truths, these replacement games continuously fail and the shame of this failure provokes further desire for the reparation which forms the aesthetic structure of the novel. The beauty of the novel, then, is in the irreparability of games. Scaling up Maisie's method and applying it to James's style shows that the poetics of deceit which governs the novel realises its aesthetic value in the mirrored patterns of the attempts and failures of the reparative impulse.

Games appear to make childhood transparent in that they are an activity through which the child outwardly engages with their reality.<sup>163</sup> Games frame a particular way of looking at the world, a representational system that is rule-bound and coherent, and in so doing they act as though they are rendering their contents and mode of operation transparent. James, like Freud's unresolved analysis of the fort/da game, probes this theory to test how far these supposedly internally regulated systems can organise the reality they create, and whether if they succeed they might "reveal" the child's knowledge, the key to knowledge of the self. Both *The Turn of the Screw* and *What Maisie Knew*, demonstrate the variety of forms that children's games might adopt, and the multiple, inscrutable motivations behind these games. As the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* declares: "'Their more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness. It's a game,'" I went on; "it's a policy and a fraud!"' (p. 69). Perceiving this performative game of beauty and goodness from Maisie's point of view we come to understand it as a necessary deceit. Games in themselves, then, are not transparent but inherently disingenuous; it is in this disingenuousness and in the breakdown of games, their inability to remain either opaque *or* transparent, that James perceives their beauty. These moments (for example when Maisie attempts to join with the lies of her parents as they desert her) at which games are short-circuited by Jamesian style, a style operating within the disappearing space that is the performance of transparency, encourage a childlike reading practice. Games are a crucial component of James's reparative poetics of deceit; as they fail and are rebuilt, James's narratives trace the motives behind this continual process of reconstruction and the structuring affects that these failures produce, leading as they do to Maisie's final dichotomy at the end of the novel: whether to stay with Mrs Wix or leave with Mrs Beale and Sir Claude. The games Maisie plays have reparative motives which emerge out of suspicion; this suspicion is a result of her inability to

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<sup>163</sup> G. Stanley Hall's analysis of doll play in 'A Study of Dolls' (1896) looks to games, toys and play in the form of the doll to grant access to the mind of the child.

straightforwardly engage with the adult world on its own terms. The childlike reading practice determined by Jamesian style follows this same formula: suspicion provoked by interpretative difficulty causes Maisie and the reader to feel the shame which, in turn, determines their reparative motive.

Maisie's reparative reading practice relies on the performativity of Jamesian style in conjunction with interpretative difficulty. Interpretative difficulty releases the performativity of style from being purely formalist – from conforming to, enacting and reproducing the rules of the game. The reparative childlike reading, or 'second naïveté', produced in this process is a pure or innocent game, a game without rules that interrupts the novel's suspicious games of transparency and in so doing disturbs the morality of the novel. In being freed from the formalism of interpretation games through misreading, the child is then neither knowing nor Romantic; released to a proliferation of replacement games the figure of the child is then in flux. I suggest, however, that the child in James's work breaks free of this formalism only to become trapped again in a different version of transcendental difficulty as the nature of the reparative dictates. At the end of the novel Maisie remains trapped, not by the formalism of games of transparency, but by the ethical judgements of her hopeful childlike reading practice. For James then, saving the child and torturing the child are the same thing; to confront this double-bind, readers are forced to read *alongside* Maisie.

A Romantic child defined by an impenetrable innocence divorces the child from "adulthood," making her a strange unknowable other with "special" knowledge of the world through a transparent, transcendent relationship with it. This has created a situation in which adults simultaneously desire and fear this presumed childhood knowledge. I am not suggesting that James is demystifying the figure of the child. Rather I propose that *What Maisie Knew* foregrounds the futility of attempts to discern what the child knows and in so doing exposes the absurdity of this fearful and desiring impulse to retrieve, by way of the child, the origins of knowledge. Michals observes that James's interest in writing *What Maisie*

*Knew* stemmed, at least in part, from a desire to recreate the distance between the mind of the adult and the mind of the child. I have argued here that recreating this distance is, for James, crucial to an exploration of the opacity of the mind in general: the distance between one mind and another. This opacity is not simply the Romanticisation of the difference of the child from adult life. Rather it is an attempt to explore the ways in which the child challenges us to read attuned to the reparative potential of style. The version of childlike reading which develops in the novel, then, is an intergenerational interpretative practice founded in misreading, which emerges in the intersections of suspicion and reparation.

Reading Maisie in relation to the aestheticisation of simplicity and transparency that circulates around the figure of the Romantic child illuminates the version of morality which emerges in Jamesian style. The doubled nature of games in *What Maisie Knew* – as both innocent or pure games and oppositional games of suspicion – demonstrates that they can act as both reparative and suspicious models for interpretation. Maisie resists the immorality surrounding her through truth games; she makes situations and statements ethical by participating in deceit to make them performatively true. The way Maisie reads forces us to read her differently; we learn to read with her – to read suspiciously in order to repair. By analysing the ways in which the difficulties with reading the child are linked to the child as reader, this chapter has demonstrated that an anti-epistemic structure of childlike reading works alongside the epistemology of reading that emerges in the novel to form a reparative reading practice which embraces interpretative struggle and exposes transparency as a strategy for obfuscation.

Childlike reading, though in tension with suspicious reading, is not its opposite; it is not trusting or simply obedient reading, instead it is hopeful and this hope is not without risk or struggle. A hopeful, childlike reading practice does not unproblematically conceal interpretation. Rather, it enters the child and her performances of transparency into the

interpretative arena. New forms of knowledge then become available to the reparative reader as she reorganises her discursive encounters with attention to the performative force of style.

## 3.

'Dangerous Pastimes':<sup>164</sup>Writing Toys and Temporality in Elizabeth Bowen's novels

*Somewhere within the pattern, somewhere behind the words, a responsive, querying innocence stays intact.*<sup>165</sup>

Elizabeth Bowen disturbs a Jamesian notion of literary subjectivity which emerges from the childlike reader's active encounters with performances of style, invading it with tenacious interruptions from a material world of antagonistic, sentient objects such as toys. In contrast to James, Bowen decentres our reading practices by drawing attention to these toys lingering at the margins of the plot. Her characters are held in an interdependent relationship with the objects limning their perspective (the contents of luggage or homes). Objects, such as toys, do not simply hold a representational or even solely symbolic value which would work to constitute the identities of the characters. Rather they mark out a hybrid reality beyond the dualism of subject and object. Indeed, throughout Bowen's oeuvre the importance of a character's interiority diminishes; in her final novel *Eva Trout* interiority is ultimately secondary to the toy-like objects, or playthings, which determine the trajectory of the plot.<sup>166</sup>

Reading Bowen's novels, then, is less about *participating* in the author's style, as it is with James, and more about focusing on instances of self-reflexive fictionality which draw our attention to acts of plotting in the narrative and challenge assumptions about "plot".<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Eva Trout* (London: Vintage, 1999) p. 170. All subsequent references will appear in text.

<sup>165</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Roving Eye', *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, Selected by Hermione Lee (London: Virago Press, 1986) pp. 63-65, p. 64.

<sup>166</sup> Elizabeth C. Inglesby's work on Bowen's expressive objects identifies this tension between the attenuated interiority of characters and the central role that objects play at pivotal moments in the plots of Bowen's novels. ("Expressive Objects": Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materialises', *MFS*, 53:2 (summer 2007) pp. 306-333.)

<sup>167</sup> Maud Ellmann discusses this focus on plot as opposed to style in her influential work on Bowen, 'Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen', *New England Review*, 24:1 (winter 2003) pp.144-169, p. 157.

If James could be considered to be torturing the child with reading by involving the child so intricately in his stylistic project, what does Bowen's focus on reading for the plot mean for the child or, indeed, the childlike Jamesian reader? Peter Brooks conceives of plot as 'the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning.' By virtue of producing a narrative, plot deals with 'the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness'.<sup>168</sup> In line with this, Bowen's novels are self-consciously concerned with plot in relation to temporality. However, her work pushes against Brooks's definition of plot, and the sense of plotting moulded by the traditional novel form, by contesting the versions of knowledge and truth produced by narrative sequence, and indeed, forming new versions of literary knowledge tied to a significant revision of the relationship between plot and the multiple temporalities of writing and reading.<sup>169</sup>

I suggest that it is her focus on objects which generates a different form of literary knowledge to that cultivated by James in *What Maisie Knew*, one in which a generous childlike reading is suffocated by the oppressive weight of materiality.<sup>170</sup> Bowen is not simply

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<sup>168</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003) p. xi.

<sup>169</sup> By thinking about Bowen as encouraging a version of reading for the plot, I do not mean to overlook her preoccupation with the excesses of style, a style clearly influenced by James. Style, for Bowen, is not distinguishable from plot; indeed, style should work to enhance the plot through forcing writing and literary knowledge into the present. In 'The Poetic Element in Fiction', Bowen discusses the limits of the novel form and the necessity of re-discovering the 'immediacy' and 'aliveness' of 'action' and 'story'. She proposes that a 'break-through' has been made by 'Henry James, but without the sacrifice of intelligibility [as it is with James Joyce and Gertrude Stein], but merely at the cost of a demand for more intuition and more understanding in the reader. This frontier line between prose with its precision, and poetry with its infusion of what cannot be precise – that frontier line, as I feel it, ... unsure and tremulous, is certainly beginning to yield ... we certainly, who attempt now in these days to crystallise the story, to find our internal stronghold for the story, and yet to keep the drama, the shape, the primitive action of the story clear. We are trying to fuse our words, not only in their meanings, but as Shelley said, they could be fused also in their sounds. We aim perhaps, for the concatenation, for the overtone, for what is apparently inharmonious. ... Our idea of style, when we write or we tell a story, is not purely suppleness and surface for its own sake. It is something of a muscularity and a strength, but it also a style which should be capable of being luminous and transparent. ... But, if we are to continue to tell stories ... we must be able to use the narrative language at white heat, and if in our experimentation we bungle or fail, if our language offends or seems incomprehensible, the allowance for the attempt, the hope of capturing, not for ourselves but for art and comprehension a new position, a new forward post for the story must be allowed for.' ('The Poetic Element in Fiction', *Listening In*, Allan Hepburn (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) pp. 153-162, pp. 160-161). She explains that the break-through made by James is dependent upon the demands he makes of his readership. The 'allowance' she speaks of from the reader, however, is not the same as the reading alongside I propose is encouraged in James's texts. Bowen is not asking for the same sort of readership as James; instead, she is unflinchingly confounding the reader's expectations.

<sup>170</sup> Ellmann also discusses the weight of materiality in Bowen's novels ('Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen', p. 149).

lamenting this suffocation of childlike reading, nor is she celebrating it; instead, her novels form networks of interaction between people, things and concepts, networks which produce a literary knowledge attuned to the heretofore unreadable, material environments determining social forces.<sup>171</sup> Bowen's characters are hypnotised by the potential of these objects to expose social hypocrisies, and as she in turn draws the reader's attention to these at once assertive and entrancing objects the reader comes to adopt, as Inglesby writes, 'the tendency of children to sense more readily, and less rationally, that things have secrets, and the capacity (or lack thereof) for objects to act as vessels of history and personality.'<sup>172</sup> In his work on play, Patrick W. Moran similarly proposes that the reader is returned to childhood by Bowen's novels as they are 'forced to play with the instabilities of material realities'.<sup>173</sup> Building on this work, I demonstrate that Bowen engages with a Jamesian version of childlike reading; I contend, however, that unlike James she does not turn to *games* as models for framing her aesthetic approach or articulating elements of her literary style.<sup>174</sup> Instead, childlike reading emerges in tension with the materiality of toys. Childlike reading is almost invisible in Bowen's novels; when it appears, it is oneiric and enchanted by what is concealed in the narrative, yet inert, immobilised by materiality. Often rendered impotent by the repressive and hypocritical social dynamics at work in her novels, toys, such as tricycles and kaleidoscopes, work to interrupt modernity's narratives of progress, and rupture the value systems of the modernist novel that privilege a Jamesian preoccupation with difficulty and subjectivity.

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<sup>171</sup> A useful model for conceptualising these networks is provided in Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, in which he states that those who bracket off the external referent and the speaker can only speak about 'meaning effects and language games'; instead, he proceeds to think about 'hybrid interactions' as part of a 'Parliament of Things'. (trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993) p. 5).

<sup>172</sup> Inglesby, "'Expressive Objects": Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materialises', p. 321.

<sup>173</sup> Patrick W. Moran, 'Elizabeth Bowen's Toys and the Imperatives of Play', *Eire-Ireland*, 46:1-2 (spring/summer 2011) pp. 152-176, p. 164.

<sup>174</sup> Critics, such as Moran, however, have argued that she does use games for these purposes (*Ibid.*, p. 152).

Modernism's relationship with difficulty is arguably one which critiques the idea of literary production as play. I trace an alternative strain of modernism in Bowen's work which engages with this resistance to the compounding of play and literary production in a critical way without whole-heartedly participating in a substitute vision of a playful modernism at ease. Moran maintains that Bowen elides the difference between child's play and the work of the adult artist.<sup>175</sup> I demonstrate, however, that imaginative child's play in Bowen's novels, and the work of the Romantic figure of the writer-as-child which emerges from the compulsion to appropriate this form of play, is continually disrupted by the materiality of toys. Acutely aware of literary production in terms of the economics governing the consumption and the reception of literature, Bowen undermines the modernist notion of the primacy of consciousness as the marshalling influence for aesthetic schemes or practices.<sup>176</sup> In Bowen's novels, literary knowledge, and the forms of production which generate this knowledge, are at once mediated and contested by toys.

Questioning how cultural conventions, specifically those conventions imbedded in discourses around the role of the writer, can remain relevant when faced with the rapid pace of social change in the post-war period is a central concern of Bowen's oeuvre, which gains momentum in her last two novels, *The Little Girls* (1964) and *Eva Trout* (1968). Hermione Lee's comprehensive study of Bowen's oeuvre asserts that her 'greatest fiction, in the 1930s and 1940s, came out of a match between her historical attitudes, her literary manner and her idea of society. In the post-war years, her writing seemed less in tune with the world she was

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>176</sup> Susan Osborn discusses this in her 'Introduction to Elizabeth Bowen: New Directions for Critical Thinking', *MFS*, 53:2 (summer 2007) pp. 225-237, p. 233. In letters between Bowen, Graham Greene and V.S. Pritchett, they discuss how the writer lives now, the writer's relationship with "society" and with the reader, and the issue of writing for money. Bowen argues that the stress should be on the creative work, not the social aspect of writing. ('The Creative Life in Our Time', *Partisan Review*, 15:11 (November 1948) pp. 1175-1190, p. 1185). She also proposes that the question of the writer's relationship with society arises because the reader is drawn to 'the possibility of shape' which they perceive in the novel and desire to realise this in the form of "society"; even those stories which 'end in the air' and 'objectify futility' satisfy a readerly desire for order and design. (Ibid., pp. 1183-1184). James and DeLillo are similarly concerned with the reader's desire for shape in the novel, and approach this demand from different perspectives.

describing.<sup>177</sup> It is, however, precisely this discordant displacement, emphasised by Lee, which enables her late novels to scrutinise the cultural fantasies emerging out of the uncertainty of the time. An elegiac romanticism unsettled by a sharp, humorous and in places, cutting, ambivalence characterises Bowen's distinctive tone and diffuse, periphrastic style.

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle controversially assert that Bowen's work in fact unravels any 'pretensions to authority or completeness' of the novel form, her final two novels signalling its complete 'dissolution'.<sup>178</sup> Building on their work, many of the essays comprising Susan Osborn's influential *New Critical Perspectives* have continued to situate Bowen's late novels within an emerging postmodern poetics of the novel, focussing on her scrutiny of her inherited literary history, her engagement with discussions around the impossibility of newness when faced with cultural saturation, and the responsibility of the writer towards pursuing originality in these circumstances. Continuing this examination of Bowen's self-conscious preoccupation with the role of the writer, this chapter considers the ways in which her final novel in particular produces a tension between toys and child's play which works at once to challenge what she perceives to be the writer's and reader's all-too-earnest relationship with literary work, and to articulate (or disarticulate) the diminishing possibility of cultivating a critical voice with which to read the novel when it is pushed to this point of dissolution.

### 3.1. The 'Querying Innocence' of Fiction-making

Adumbrating the process of constructing a character in 'Notes on Writing a Novel', Bowen uses the metaphor of toy craftsmanship: 'Are they to be drawn, cut out, jointed, wired, in

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<sup>177</sup> Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999) p. 182.

<sup>178</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1995) p. xx.

order to be manipulated for the plot? ... one cannot make characters only marionettes.<sup>179</sup> She claims here that the writer is incapable of capturing interiority; for Bowen, the process of building characters alongside the demands of the plot, necessarily transforms any characters into marionettes. These impotent yet elegant, unreal marionette characters are crowded out by Bowen's dynamic objects, which in contrast to her characters, continually agitate the direction of the plot.

Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1926) is one such novel in which objects-turned-playthings perform a pivotal role, not just as imaginative resources for the characters, but in the plot itself. The novel plays out over a single day in the life of two displaced children, Henrietta and Leopold, who are staying for the day in a house which is the kernel of past tragedies, a house full of secrets, whispers and lies concerning the children. Leopold, who was adopted at birth, is anxiously awaiting his first meeting with his mother, Karen. Intruding on the interactions of Henrietta and Leopold, *The House in Paris* becomes a novel about the adult desire for children to provide an escape from the tragedies of the past, to redeem the secret plots of adults by reimagining their origins, and ultimately, about the limits of the child's ability to fulfil either of these roles.

Left alone in a room together for the first time the children quickly discover that they have both been instructed not to probe too deeply into each other's stories: why they are waiting in the house, or what has happened to their parents.<sup>180</sup> As Leopold bluntly interrogates Henrietta on her mother's death and how she might understand her emotional relationship with someone lost or absent, the narrative voice interjects to articulate the anxieties that the reader shares with Henrietta in this moment: 'With no banal reassuring grown-ups present, with grown-up intervention taken away, there is no limit to the terror

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<sup>179</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel', *Pictures and Conversations by Elizabeth Bowen*, (London: Penguin, 1975) pp. 167-193, p. 172.

<sup>180</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris* (London: Vintage, 1998) p. 31. All subsequent references will appear in text.

strange children feel of each other, a terror life obscures but never ceases to justify. There is no end to the violations committed by children on children, quietly talking alone.' (p. 31). The novel, then, realises the greatest fears of James's governess in *The Turn of the Screw*; that children are always-already corrupted by language, and that their innocence is, therefore, an act organised around a performed lack of knowledge.

Naomi, who lives in the house caring for her ailing mother, Mme Fisher, is tasked with looking after the children for the day. Her caution around the conversations between the two children develops from the instructions given in a letter from Leopold's Aunt Marian who has brought him up thus far, to ensure Leopold's ignorance in sexual matters when he meets his mother. The letter states:

We have of course no idea *what* revelations Leopold's mother may see fit to make, but we do trust you will beg her to be discreet and have regard for his temperament and the fact that he has not yet received direct sex-instruction. Almost any fact she might mention seems to us still unsuitable. (p. 41, original emphasis).

Aunt Marian fears that the story of Leopold's origins will reveal to him a knowledge of sexuality which she believes to be inappropriate. Leopold, however, discovers the letter; the irony here is of course that Aunt Marian's letter, with its suggestive tone, has done far more to further Leopold's interest in what he does not know than a meeting with his mother would have elucidated. His desire for knowledge of his mother only intensifies with the hints about his parents revealed in the letter from Aunt Marian. The letter has a profound impact on Leopold; his mind is drawn to moments at which he had attempted to explore his sexuality but had been prevented by the Grant Moodys' over-zealous censorship: 'He saw the row of red plasticine figures he had kept for days ... and the one vague shape he had modelled that had dismayed Uncle Dee and disappeared in the night. Miasmas crept over all he had done and touched there. He saw himself tricked into living.' (p. 44). Leopold is revolted by these unexpected revelations and his memories are coloured anew with fresh and frightening

meanings. He is desperate 'to clap something on to the gash in his mind' (p. 42). In response to this overpowering emotion, the impulse to repair this gash in his mind, he constructs a fictional letter from his mother to Naomi using an empty envelope, and proceeds to read it aloud. The letter describes his reunification with his mother; he imagines her stating that she cannot do without him and will be taking him back to England to live with her (p. 45). Although words are the cause of this gash in Leopold's mind, here he returns to words to cauterise the wound. 'Words themselves produce the gash', write Bennett and Royle, 'Words themselves cicatrize the trauma.'<sup>181</sup>

The child's sexual knowledge in *The House in Paris*, as in James's *What Maisie Knew*, is dependent upon fiction-making which in this novel is a distinctly linguistic endeavour; the child's desire for knowledge of their origins, their parents' bodies, leads them to construct fictional narratives which answer these ontological concerns. Similarly to Maisie, Leopold is orchestrating his own truth game, a fiction-making exercise designed to repair the tragedies of the past and redeem adult plots. His mother's actual letter, the missing material object which declares the fact that she will not be coming, nevertheless, reasserts its force beyond its role as plaything to determine the plot of the novel. Leopold's imagined letter, rendered impotent in this sense, does, however, lead the way for the novel's middle section entitled 'The Past'. This section is an imagined retelling of Leopold's conception. Met with the statement 'Your mother is not coming; she cannot come' (p. 66), 'The Past' begins:

Meetings that do not come off keep a character of their own. They stay as they were projected. So the mother who did not come to meet Leopold that afternoon remained his creature, able to speak the truth. ... by her not coming the slate was wiped clear of every impossibility; he was not (at least that day) to have to find her unable to speak in his own, which were true, terms. (p. 67).

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<sup>181</sup> Bennett and Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, p. 60.

The narrative imagines an origin story for Leopold completely free of the trappings of adult deceit, those subtle anxieties he perceives in Aunt Marion's letter and buzzing through the whispers of the house. The meeting between Leopold and his mother could only take place 'on the plane of potential not merely likely behaviour. Or call it art, with truth and imagination informing every word. Only there ... could Karen have told Leopold what had really been.' (p. 67). The narrative implies that 'The Past' is constructed by Leopold himself, almost instantaneously, as he receives the news that his mother is no longer coming: in 'that meeting whose scene remained inside Leopold ... This is, in effect, what she would have to say.' (p. 68). This blurs the distinction between the inside of Leopold and the outside of the novel's narrative voice. Moments such as this demonstrate that fictionality in Bowen's novels is not defined in opposition to truth. Leopold's fictional language of 'true terms', indistinguishable from the narrative voice of 'The Present', then, marks the beginning of Bowen's concern with the possibilities of fiction-making. The layering of fictions in instances of self-conscious fictionality such as this subtly undo the novel form; events occur in this imaginative space of the past only for the narrative to fold back into the temporal space of this single day in Paris where nothing has changed. Appealing to Leopold's 'true terms', Bowen returns the novel to its fictionality.

Since the development of the novel form, she writes, 'we have been less often given a "pure" story. The novel gives one the sense of a story used.'<sup>182</sup> The novel, she suggests, is a form dependent upon its purposiveness, its desire to picture history, or to convey a moral or ethical message. What is shocking about 'The Past' if it is authored by Leopold, is precisely the complexity of its morality: the truth of its terms around sex and death. Childhood language is true here in its direct relationship with the irresolvable, negative space of childhood knowledge which is distinguished as the space in which the writer might locate

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<sup>182</sup> Bowen, 'The Poetic Element in Fiction', p. 153.

the possibility of fiction.<sup>183</sup> In Bowen's work, this imaginative child's play is invested with the possibility of redeeming fiction-making in its capacity to unmake the novel; this possibility, however, is continually confronted by the resistant materiality of toys.

Unable to meet their tragic pasts in which the secrets of their origins are located, and faced with the impotence of their fictions, children in Bowen's novels turn themselves into toys. Questioned by Henrietta on his relationship with his absent mother, Leopold 'Silhouetted against the unsunny muslin blind ... began rocking backwards and forwards, from his toes to his heels'. He turns this repetitive action into a game by attempting to stay balanced without removing his hands from his pockets, and in so doing 'became his own rocking toy whose equilibrium flattered him; meanwhile showing Henrietta that he had no thoughts.' (p. 30). Unlike James's Maisie, who through her limited success with adult discourse develops a childlike reading practice to engage with the performativity of truth, Leopold and Henrietta are completely unable to participate in adult truth games, to intervene in the secrets and lies which circulate around them; instead, they turn themselves into toys. Although Leopold authors his own history, this act is ultimately immobilised, not by an abstract concept of human "destiny", but rather by the capricious, (dis)organising force of material culture. In work on the relationship between Bowen's heroines and technological advancements, Céline Margot writes that 'characters seem to be actuated by a mechanical logic that defies conscious choice'.<sup>184</sup> They are pulled and pushed by the objects which constitute the content of the plot, and as such are denied the level of conscious choice, albeit restricted, afforded to Maisie's performances. The children, displaced within a plot which they cannot participate in, do not turn themselves into toys in an attempt to resist or rupture

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<sup>183</sup> This thesis defines negativity as an irresolvable lack; the child's innocence is the ideal site of negativity as it is a lack desired purely for itself, the fulfilment of this lack is, indeed, undesirable. In order to analyse negativity in Bowen's novels and the implications of negativity for her identity as a writer, I align my use of the term in part with John Keats's idea of 'negative capability' as the writer's capacity to 'be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' and be 'content with half knowledge'. (*The Letters of John Keats*, H. E. Rollins (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958) i, pp.193-194).

<sup>184</sup> Céline Margot, 'Prosthetic Goddesses: Ambiguous Identities in the Age of Speed', *Textual Practice*, 27:1 (2013) pp. 127-142, p. 131.

the plot by mimicking the way that toy-like objects often do this, or indeed to express the stasis of their powerless, transitional status. Instead, this transformation shifts the child into the realm of objects in which they can proudly display their lack of both knowledge and interiority. This is not a different version of Maisie's performance of transparency, a necessary camouflage through which to short-circuit the suspicion of surrounding adults. This inversion of subject and object in Leopold's display of simple, negative space refuses to become the querying innocence of the writer. Rather, this becoming-toys works as the dismissal of the value placed on the paradoxical conceptual relationship between consciousness (a pure, whole self) and innocence, and in this act of refusal reifies the oblique negativity of innocence.

The objects in *The House in Paris*, like the characters, seem strangely aware of their performance as toys within the narrative, and approach the objectified subjects of the narrative with intimidating force. On first entering the house Henrietta 'felt the house was acting, nothing seemed to be natural; objects did not wait to be seen but came crowding in on her, each with what amounted to its aggressive cry.' (p. 24). When Naomi has to break the news to Leopold that the anticipated end to the story has been changed, that his mother is no longer coming, the pull of the altered situation, becoming too strong, tears any semblance of control away from her: 'She did not know she was she; her body moved itself – till, all at once, the glance she cast round the salon seemed to be torn from her. As for Henrietta, she went flat.' (p. 191). Dragged by the plot and its objects towards an undesirable conclusion, Naomi is dislocated from her body, her movements seem not her own. Meanwhile a moribund Henrietta is squashed, she falls flat as though her puppet-master has dropped her strings. In the face of rapid social change characters become, what Bennett and Royle consider to be a 'still life', softening the boundary between alive and dead, animate and inanimate.<sup>185</sup> Focusing more specifically on Bowen's puppetry imagery, Moran suggests that

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<sup>185</sup> Bennett and Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, p. xviii.

it works to convey Bowen's fear of people becoming like puppets in response to the determining force of social expectations.<sup>186</sup> More than this, however, Bowen ruthlessly stumps her readers in their continual process of reaching for knowledge of a single subject, often located in the form of the innocent child, and leads them to the conclusion that this fragmented marionette body is all they have; that no core subjectivity exists. As Bowen's final heroine, Eva Trout, puts it 'What *is* a person? Is it true, there is not more than one of each?' (p. 193). Bowen's attenuated marionette characters force the reader to question their own subject position, to recognise the nature of the modern self as irreparably severed from any sense of an autonomous, creative consciousness. The trope of puppetry, then, at once agitates the work of representation and operates to transgress and reconfigure the discourse of what is considered human. This exploration into the oblique elements of selfhood and subjectivity reaches its apex in Bowen's unreal and unknowable infant-giantess Eva Trout.

Bowen's final novel, *Eva Trout*, maps the ways in which an experience of the self is 'organised according to certain schemes',<sup>187</sup> these schemes are culturally reproduced and relate to economic and social positions formed within the determining conditions of a material environment. Unpicking discourses of growth, identity and subjectivity, the novel investigates what happens when these schemes lose their symbolic meaning and become defunct; it then dramatises the attempts and failures to reinvest these schemes with meaning through the troublesome fiction-making of its heroine.<sup>188</sup> Bowen exposes the operation of these schemes in her representations of the toys and games which either exemplify or struggle against them. Explicit references to toys and games within *Eva Trout* alone include: 'playing

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<sup>186</sup> Moran, 'Elizabeth Bowen's Toys and the Imperatives of Play', p. 160.

<sup>187</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Subjectivity and Truth', *Ethics: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 1*, Paul Rabinow (ed.), trans. by Robert Hurley and others (London: Penguin, 2000) pp. 87-93, p. 87.

<sup>188</sup> Bowen's engagement with significant Romantic concerns regarding the organising role played by cultural conventions in times of uncertain social change, and the transformations in the role of the writer in relation to these shifts, invites comparison with the work of Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth. His theory that growth can only occur through 'the failure of existing schemata' was constructed in response to the violence of revolution in France (circa 1787) and came to form the driving force behind his investment in returning to childhood as a way to revolutionise the conventional linear developmental narratives dictating the growth of individuals and societies (Prickett, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth*, p. 146).

cowboys-and-Indians' (p. 24), marionettes (p. 23), sand castles (p. 89), waxworks (p. 104), dolls (p. 137), bicycles (of which there are many) and tricycles (p. 170), scooters (p. 163), cat's-cradle (p. 180), a ferris wheel (p. 189), card games (p. 195), board games (p. 196), clockwork toys (p. 253; 217), picture books (p. 163; 253), and many instances of role play. Toys and games appear as both diegetic objects owned and interacted with by characters, and also in similes and metaphors employed by characters and the narrator which form a leitmotif orientated around the resistant materiality of these animated objects. Hidden in a child's suitcase or tidied away with a secret life of their own, toys embody the power of matter to remain unreadable while powerfully determining our expectations. The reader's attention is drawn towards objects such as these, which often enter into literature only tangentially but here announce their presence at the margins of the plot, reoccurring throughout before taking centre stage at the close of the novel. The intentionality which inheres in ideas around games and child's play exists in this novel only as an illusion; an engagement with objects then takes the place of the writer-as-child as the primary organising force for Bowen's aesthetic endeavours. The version of literary subjectivity that emerges is dependent upon a material environment full of toys which prompt the behaviour of characters; this subjectivity, then, is just one element of a network of relations between things and concepts in which the boundaries between human and inhuman are disassembled.

*Eva Trout* is a coming-of-age story beginning on the verge of Eva's twenty-fifth birthday when she will inherit her father's vast fortune. Commencing at this pivotal moment, the novel advances by oscillating backwards and forwards in time to map Eva's perpetual becoming, and in so doing explore the intricate procedures of identity formation dependent upon a material environment of emboldened objects, such as toys. Despite the novel's preoccupation with the vicissitudes of identity, the reader discovers little about the early life of Bowen's final and most inscrutable heroine. We learn throughout the novel that Eva's late father, Willy Trout, was a manic, incredibly successful financier – the embodiment of

capitalism's ludic tendencies – and that following the sudden death of her mother in a plane crash, Eva spent her young life travelling with him around the world on his lavish business trips: in perpetual motion she remained a perpetual outsider, 'displaced' until her father's haunting suicide. Her unusually rootless childhood and position as an heiress to economic ascendancy make Eva an 'alien' in English society and culture (p. 189); the novel then maps her convulsive attempts to forge a home and identity.

Bowen continually probes this feeling of alienation, of being unable to find yourself represented in cultural fantasies.<sup>189</sup> Discussing the proliferation of Romantic images of childhood in post-war fiction in her essay 'The Bend Back' (1950), Bowen adumbrates the internecine relationship between uncertainty and nostalgia underpinning a literary return to childhood; she offers a subtle examination – not a simple critique – of the Romantic ideology permeating contemporary cultural fantasies.<sup>190</sup> The essay depicts an idealised national childhood; she asserts that 'England dwells upon a *picture of exuberance in a settled scene* – unspoiled countrysides, tribes of ruddy-faced children raised in manors, parsonages, farmhouses, cottages with roses over the porch.'<sup>191</sup> Bowen suggests that this Romantic vision dominates the nation's imagined childhood. The cottage described here closely matches that of Larkins where Eva stays after leaving school. Nevertheless, this image of rural childhood presents a 'settled scene', a nostalgically still and complete picture of an imagined cultural heritage that Eva, due to her disconnected and displaced personal history, is unable to invest in. As a result of this dislocation from cultural fantasies, Eva orchestrates a number of increasingly complex fictions. It is through these fictions that Bowen explores the fiction-

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<sup>189</sup> This is arguably due in part to Bowen's own displaced Anglo-Irish personal history. Critics such as Hermione Lee and Susan Osborne have explored in more detail the implications of Bowen's biography for reading issues around identity in her work.

<sup>190</sup> Bowen qualifies her criticisms stating: 'Desire to be reminded may be a modern symptom, but it deserves respect'. ('The Bend Back', *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, Hermione Lee (ed.) (London: Virago Press, 1986) pp. 54-60, p. 56).

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 57, emphasis added.

making role of the playful writer equipped with a 'querying innocence' that enables them to remain, to some degree, removed from cultural convention.

A year later Bowen revisits this work on return journeys to childhood in an essay entitled 'The Cult of Nostalgia'. Although Bowen is sympathetic towards this Romantic impulse to return to the fantasy world of childhood in such uncertain times, she unsettles any comfortable romanticisation of childhood:

The most concrete, most personal past is childhood. Childhood is a terrain which we all can, or all fancy we can, re-enter, without falsifications, without breaches with honesty. It is a meeting-ground, for have not all childhoods much in common? At a distance, that time of any life seems to have been both simple and dramatic; and also this was a time of fresh, sharp and pure sensation.<sup>192</sup>

With her trademark combination of 'querying innocence' and ambivalent satire, Bowen clearly sets out the returning Romantic vision of childhood as an accessibly still space of uniquely pre-social access to 'pure sensation'. This romanticisation of childhood forms, for Bowen, a dangerous 'cult': a well-established, all-encompassing world-view which unifies disparate personal pasts, bringing people together but removing them from the present. Though she accepts the fleeting, ephemerality of the present and the validity of the accompanying desperate desire for escape into the imagined stillness of history, she suggests it is the responsibility of the writer not to indulge solely in the easy fantasy of a lost past. This aligns with her suggestion in 'The Bend Back' that the novelist lends herself the 'telepathic' power to connect with readers through tapping into this common 'meeting-ground' of childhood; she asserts that the novelist has a responsibility to eschew this tempting power and wrestle, instead, with the more pressing, complex task of representing the ever-shifting present. Writing that involves childhood in multiple ways is, for Bowen, a dangerous pastime that must engage with the temporality of fiction-making; these fictions relate to both the

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<sup>192</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Cult of Nostalgia', *Listening In*, pp. 97-103, p. 98.

past, the present-becoming-past, and the future. Her essays betray a fascination that plays out in her novels with the capacity of the Romantic child figure to reduce fictional time, to be paradoxically ‘simple yet dramatic’.<sup>193</sup>

Eva is a version of the Romantic child made twisted and troublesome by the competing demands of this daunting conceptual figure. Removed from language, culture and social convention, Eva carries the paradoxical stillness and spontaneity of childhood into her adult life. During a visit to her love-interest Henry Dancey whilst he is studying at Cambridge, Henry probes Eva on her desires for the future. He imagines various future roles for her, suggesting that she requires a ‘social purpose’ and that this could be fulfilled by buying a grand house in London and devoting herself to the role of hostess:

‘I’m projecting a role for you. Can’t you see? Don’t you want one? You ought to – I want one for you.’

That was all, then? Eva, left heavy-hearted, looked about at the books dispersed on the floor with something of the hopeless, regretful reverence which had been hers in the Lumleigh library. Stooping, here and then there, she retrieved some, which she built up into a cairn. It wobbled and fell. (p. 178).

Constructing the experiences of her silent and obtuse heroine, Eva, Bowen continually uses toys to replace speech. Objects-turned-playthings usurp the role of the narrative voice by bringing to expression a character’s mien or complex emotional experiences; however, these objects are rebellious and do not always unproblematically manifest subjectivity. Despite her love for Henry, Eva finds the negotiations of desire a painful process; the responsibility to change is experienced as a kind of death. In order to memorialise the fictional identities she will have to abandon in her commitment to a life with Henry, she builds a ‘cairn’ out of anonymous scattered books. Eva enjoys creating new fictional roles for herself, such as lover, mother or daughter, but never attaches a sense of identity to these roles – constantly physically mobile, she flees from full commitment to any one role, appearing more interested

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<sup>193</sup> Bowen, ‘The Bend Back’, p.57.

in the virtual accessibility of roles than in their actual fulfilment. Eva's cairn of books is a monument to a lost educated self, an identity she will never be able to embody. She uses play to express her frustration with the limited roles on offer for her; the role that society or love projects for her is not a future that she feels she can embrace. Eva's childlike play transforms the books into building bricks; she engages with books not for their content but solely for their objectness, and in so doing returns them to their material form. Crucially, Eva's monument fails: unrecognised by the other characters it stands only momentarily before collapsing. Transforming books into toys, she wants to make them hold symbolic value as vessels of history; however, in their newly resistant material role they refuse to behave simply as building bricks which contain history, instead they immediately topple returning to their disorganised arrangement on the floor of Henry's room. The purpose of the cairn is to stand as a monument to that past that will live into the future – its fleeting existence here exposes the feebleness of literature as a monument to the past in the face of the multiple forces of material objects.

Eva encounters books from the position of a non-reader, wary of the version of knowledge they symbolise and excluded from this knowledge. She craves the attention of her teacher, the aloof Iseult Smith, whom she blames for abandoning her education. While staying with Iseult and her husband Eric Arble at their house Larkins, Eva's feeling of rejection intensifies. As friction builds between the two women, Eva allows Iseult to develop a suspicion that she has started a sexual relationship with Eric. In conversation Eva deliberately misleads Iseult, implying that she is pregnant with Eric's baby.

“You have no notion how Eric misses you. For instance—couldn't you possibly come to us for Christmas? ... Why, if you do come then, it will have been seven—no, eight, nine?—months since he's seen you. A long time.”

“Nine,” said Eva, looking up at the evergreen.

“Then at least, Christmas?”

“Christmas is in December?”

“It is usually.—Why? Is there anything else you think of doing?”

“In December I shall be having a little child.” (p. 121).

It is this lie, and the fictional worlds it opens up, that then structures the rest of the novel. Following this, Eva flees to the U.S. in order to purchase a child to support her lie and embrace her new fictional identity as a mother. She returns to England eight years later with her adopted son Jeremy who is both deaf and dumb. Unlike Leopold’s fiction about the past, Eva’s fastens her fictions, not to language but to time, the time of child birth and child rearing, and in so doing makes her fictions real temporally in a way that Leopold’s are not. It is Eva’s fictions, most poignantly her pregnancy fiction, and the fact that they share temporally in Jeremy’s childhood, that lead unavoidably to her murder.

After falling in love with her childhood friend, Henry, who at first does not return her feelings, she manages to persuade him to contribute to another elaborate fiction: to fake their engagement and leave with her on a train, her final ‘game in a railway station’ (p. 238). Following word from Henry that he will participate in her new fiction, Eva immediately packs up her life in the hotel with Jeremy, offering Jeremy no explanation after having promised him a stable home in England. Little does Eva know, Iseult blames her for the destruction of her relationship with Eric and as a result has developed a fierce and uncontrollable obsession with her. Iseult seeks Eva out in the hotel and brings with her Eric’s gun. For unexplained reasons she leaves ‘the unappetizing parcel’ containing the gun amongst Eva’s luggage which mainly consists of toys: ‘In this room was but one outlander: a remaining container, a carton, holding things still to be sorted out, probably jettisoned, such as exhausted picture books, games with pieces missing, over-wound clockwork toys, with on top, intact still, the unappetizing parcel.’ (pp. 253-254). Broken toys disguise the gun as a discarded plaything. Left alone in the hotel room, the unfamiliar parcel attracts Jeremy’s attention. Descriptions such as this of highly charged objects similarly move the reader’s

scrutiny towards peripheral details which define the margins of the plot before coming to occupy a determining role in events.

Eva proceeds to orchestrate a dramatic scene at the train station in which friends and family gather to see the couple off on their journey. Jeremy then arrives unexpectedly: ‘Audience-minded, as are contemporary crowds, seers off and travellers stood back respectfully, according space and free play to the child star ... The boy when he first appeared on the stage, or platform, had been carrying a Gallic scarlet dispatch-case’ (p. 265). Removing the gun from his dispatch-case and brandishing it around, the crowd mistake it for a toy and refuse to intervene declaring that ‘he’s only acting!’. Playing to the crowd Jeremy ‘executed a pirouette. Everybody laughed. He drew in the firearm, looking about with a certain air of design. A child’s ballet enactment of a crime passionel? Or a boy model, advertising something: ‘Little Lord X will shoot up the train if he isn’t given – ?’ (p. 266). Caselli’s work on modernist representations of childhood suggests that because the child works transparently as matter he/she is not seen or read.<sup>194</sup> The performances of transparency by James’s Maisie work to interrupt interpretative practices in this way. When Bowen’s novels make the child centre-stage at crucial moments such as this at the end of the novel, it is precisely matter, or the material culture of childhood that remains unread. The crowd of onlookers in the train station are disarmed by the child’s performance and the gun is considered a benign toy in the child’s hands. The reader is never provided with insight into Jeremy’s thoughts or feelings; the child’s mind in *Eva Trout* ‘defies narration’, in accordance with Caselli’s theory, becoming like an object by embodying the negative space of innocence. Toys take priority over narration at crucial points in the novel, demanding the reader’s constant vigilance as they pull the plot towards its conclusion. Nevertheless, material objects such as these toys do not signify a “real” comfortably beyond the realms of fiction. Bowen’s novels, then, raise the question of the possibility of fiction-making without the narration of

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<sup>194</sup> Caselli, ‘Kindergarten Theory’, p. 243.

consciousness; or, indeed, whether fiction can only now exist in the tension created by sites such as the child's knowledge or materiality which defy narration in this way.

During her earlier visit to the National Portrait Gallery, Eva comes to the realisation that the depth of the "real" is false, that people are resistant to being read or painted (or, indeed, narrated) because 'Nothing was to be learnt from [people]'. She concludes with the reasoning that all life, therefore, is lived on the surface: 'every soul Eva knew became no longer anything but a portrait. There was no 'real life': no life was more real than this. This she had long suspected. She now was certain.' (p. 196). Subjectivity in Bowen's novels is not equivalent to, or located in, interiority; it is not an interior space possessed by people, but is, instead, accomplished through interaction with non-human objects (not just humans or language). In accordance with the style of Bowen's final novel, Eva disregards her search for interiority. In the world of the novel, there is no longer a "real" to be discovered underneath the apparent surface represented by materiality; there is only a surface of fictionality in which materiality participates and which works to collapse the distinction between the two, between subject and object, human and non-human. This disintegration of duality forces the reader to deal with the friction in this reasoning made apparent when extended to its logical conclusion in the novel where it erodes the possibility of fiction in the moment of its greatest influence, at which point fictionality succumbs to leave only the richness of materiality present in death. At the end of the novel two fictions collide and collapse simultaneously as 'an unreal act collects round it real-er emotion than a real act' (p. 261). At the last minute, Henry makes Eva's lie reality by stating that he wants to stay on the train with her, that he wants a real relationship with her. At the same time, Jeremy's performance becomes reality as he fires the gun and kills Eva. In Bowen's novels fiction as an expression of the imaginative capacity of child's play cannot remain within the bounds of artifice; fiction-making is ultimately forced to submit to the pressure of material objects. Child's play continually

interacts, either imaginatively or physically, with material objects that resist it and affect it in numerous ways and it is these relations which produce a challenge to the novel form.

James's novels invite the reader to make lies reality, to join in with the narrative's stylistic performances to make them true; this is the reality of the surface that Eva realises in the Portrait Gallery. In Bowen's novel Eva is correct in her discovery that truth is relational and exists only on the surface of things, however, the surface is made up of unruly toys not interested in joining in with lies or truths. Eva's truth games ultimately fail, and this failure, unlike Maisie's, does not generate a reparative impulse. Eva's truth games are cruel and there is nothing in the narrative that allows the reader to read alongside her games. Rather the novel creates a hostile environment for its readers. It does this, not through a commitment to the interpretative latitude of difficulty as a stylistic technique, which for James can create the space for a reparative reading. Instead the reader cannot participate in the narrative; they must only witness as Eva's truth games unravel. The becoming-real of fiction-making as an *occupation* dismantles the novel form, as the idea of fiction without the narration of interiority is put under pressure.

The dissolution of the novel, and *Eva Trout's* own destruction, is located within the vanishing space between the 'querying innocence' of the fiction-making writer-as-child, and the illusion of the child's innocence as a lack of artifice; child's play as a knowledge beyond artifice is incompatible with fiction-making by its very nature. In order to restore a certain possibility of fiction in the face of the dissolution of the novel, Bowen creates spaces of negative innocence within the plot. Eva enacts the role of the fiction-making child at play who transforms Jeremy into a plaything, as Constantine declares: 'You keep him in cellophane. You make a plaything of him; at best, a playmate.' (p. 175). The becoming-toy of the "innocent" child is positioned as the perfect lack, desired purely for its negativity by the writer who wishes to claim this space as the space in which to locate the possibility of fiction. For Bowen, we are driven to fiction-making by lack but these fictions are never resolved;

they progress only to undo themselves again. In Bowen's novels, then, readers find themselves inhabiting this world of the negativity of child's knowledge, the same world rendered only obliquely in James's novels.

Bowen's novels return her readers to childhood, but readers arrive there only to find that they are not then provided with a reparative childlike reading practice through which to participate in the narrative. Instead, childlike reading is immobilised by materiality; childhood in Bowen's novels is defined through interaction with its overbearing appurtenances, and the child's mind, marked out only as the negative space of fiction, precludes the conditions necessary for reading alongside the novel's style.<sup>195</sup> Leopold's reparative fiction-making, however, sits in contrast to Eva's; he attempts to make his mother's abandonment of him fair through reclaiming the story of his origins, retelling it in his own terms free from adult deceit. Although Eva's fictions and the ways in which she goes about making them are often cruel, the negative space she occupies is a sort of innocence. Eva's idea that nothing is to be learnt from people, that everything is visible on the surface, seems to render reading itself redundant; however, another mode of reading emerges through this focus on the surface of things. This reading practice is not a trusting surface reading; instead it is a reading practice which develops out of the failure of childlike reading. It is a reading practice attuned to a childhood experience of materiality, an experience enchanted by the secret life of things. The version of literary knowledge that this reading produces has an important temporal dimension, and as such is closely aligned with Latour's description of reading matter as 'the way we move knowledge forward in order to access things that are far away or otherwise inaccessible.'<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>Differently to James, childlike reading is characterised by Bowen in its pattern-seeking, its enchantment by what is concealed in the narrative; it desires to explain without the wish to demystify inherent to the pattern-seeking of the suspicious reader.

<sup>196</sup> Bruno Latour, 'Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?', *Isis*, 98:1 (2007) pp. 138-142, p. 139. In this essay Latour argues that, what he calls, 'idealised materialism', has taken the place of a material definition of matter which focuses on the opacity of things and 'techniques-as-things' (Ibid., p. 141). His critique of 'idealised materialism' defines it as the bringing together of two incompatible ways of reading matter: 'the way things move in order to keep themselves in existence' and 'the way we move knowledge forward in order to

The inaccessibility of Eva's knowledge and her motivations raises the question of whether belief is necessary for fiction to function, and whether the reader's belief in the narrative is influenced by the perceived "innocence" of the writer or fiction-maker. Bowen conceives of the idea of the 'querying innocence' of the writer in her essay 'The Roving Eye', in which she accounts for what she has identified as the incredible 'childishness' of the writer. The writer, she proposes, can be defined by their incapacity to outgrow the hope that the universe might be explained (explanation being a distinctly linguistic act). As the child learns the limits of language she confronts the unexplainable and gradually loses this pre-linguistic knowledge of the unexplainable; however, the writer, for Bowen, continues to push up against the limits of language in her desire to explain. This groping towards explanation in *Eva Trout*, however, exists in tension with the mode of reading materiality for its opacity which develops in the novel. Reading Bowen's work through the lens of her self-proclaimed 'querying innocence' is a reading led by unpicking the conflicts of belief that present themselves in her texts. Reading for the querying innocence of the writer is not a form of suspicious reading; querying implies a humbler form of engagement with the text than the unforgiving interrogation of a suspicious reading. Nevertheless, the logic of a querying innocence does not oppose innocence and suspicion; instead the text exposes *itself*, it offers up its 'core of naivety – a core, which, once it has been laid bare, seems either infantile or august.'<sup>197</sup> Bowen's naive writer is, however, quite different to Ricoeur's 'second naïveté' of the reader;<sup>198</sup> naivety in Bowen's work, and a reading that shares in this naivety, is not a frictionless reading alongside the narrative born out of an engagement with hermeneutics,

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access things that are far away or otherwise inaccessible' (Ibid., p. 139). The first is concerned with the multiple agencies of material things and the second with ways of accessing what is otherwise inaccessible. The version of reading matter that develops in Bowen's novels is interested in the powerful movements of objects and how our attempts to read the opacity of these movements generate a form of literary knowledge which might allow us to reclaim the possibility of fiction as a method for approaching the ever-shifting present anew. Childlike reading has a similar aim, that being to find a way of reading performances of transparency that present an inaccessible surface, but Bowen's reading matter is specifically about reading *things* in time.

<sup>197</sup> Bowen, 'The Roving Eye', p. 64.

<sup>198</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) p. 28.

‘faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith.’<sup>199</sup> Rather naivety, for Bowen, is a mode of reading through which to encounter the resistance of reading toys. Eva is described as a large block of stone, ‘Is she thinking? Mrs Dancey thought not. Monolithic, Eva’s attitude was. It was not somehow the attitude of a thinking person.’ (p. 12). Nothing about Eva is ever ‘laid bare’; Eva’s innocence seems impressive precisely because it refuses to yield to the querying innocence of the writer and embodies, instead, a version of writerly innocence as the oblique, negative space of fiction itself.

A writerly identity defined by its querying innocence has its roots in the Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge. In work on the mind of the child, mentioned in the introduction, Shuttleworth investigates the nineteenth-century critique of what came to be perceived as Romanticism’s regressive tendencies of partnering the writer and the child through a focus on imaginative play. Shuttleworth proposes that the image of Coleridge for the nineteenth century was one of ‘the child who never grew up, a Victorian verdict on the excesses of Romanticism.’<sup>200</sup> Wordsworth’s *Prelude* similarly signalled the uniquely poetic quality of adult access to the imaginative capacity of childhood. Bowen’s fiction demonstrates a fascination with how these excesses of Romanticism could be revisited, and in so doing her work suggests a new aesthetics of childhood. The arrested development of Bowen’s fiction-making toy-like characters transforms these excesses into a version of writing without any (transparent) intentionality, a version of writing that approaches the resistant materiality of objects and partners them with the negative space of childhood innocence. Bowen engages directly with this history of the writer-as-child in her essays and enters her own authorial development into this Romantic paradigm in her autobiographical work. Her short recollection of memorable moments from childhood in ‘Seven Winters’ written from the

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>200</sup> Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child*, p. 76.

perspective of her remembered child self fashions an image of an isolated, roaming poetic child, which is followed by a more sombre recounting of her ancestry in 'Bowen's Court'.

In reviews published in *The Spectator* Bowen identifies a twentieth-century resurgence in this Romantic writer-child dyad. Discussing the popularity of Aldous Huxley's essays, she applies this Romantic developmental reversal to warn him of his near descent into the dreaded asceticism of maturity. She asserts with her recognisably humorous yet formidable tone: 'This is a statement which may be considered slighting in a country that dreads maturity for its artists, in which there is a deep and horrific gap between the bright young fellow and the good old bustard, in which the dream-child and the prodigy dominate literature.'<sup>201</sup> Though critical of Huxley's 'maturity' the essay exudes a distinct sense of mocking the nation for continuing to uphold the value of childhood knowledge in creative endeavours.

Notwithstanding this critique, Bowen's later essays, such as 'The Roving Eye' and 'Children's Play', advocate the 'necessary childishness' of the writer, and in so doing present a compelling way in to understanding the conflicts that present themselves in her fictional work around the nature of the work of the writer.<sup>202</sup> Bowen's engagement with the theory of the writer-as-child, then, is multifaceted. She removes the work of writing from the Romantic

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<sup>201</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Mr Huxley's Essays', *Collected Impressions* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1950) pp. 146-148, p. 146. This essay was first published in *The Spectator* in 1936.

<sup>202</sup> In an essay written in 1941 entitled 'Children's Play' reviewing the publication of Fannie Elizabeth Ratchford's *The Brontës' Web of Childhood*, Bowen asserts that Ratchford's research is of great importance as it attends to 'the increasing interest in the phenomena of childhood and genius'. Addressing the correspondence between these two concepts she discusses the diffusion of the developmental narrative of the writer; she proposes that desire, for everyone, is dominated by one primary fantasy that was established during childhood to 'which the imagination returns and attaches itself with an almost voluptuous energy'. Bowen explains how this primary fantasy becomes multifaceted through being 'pooled, shared and developed' with the fantasies of other children resulting in what she terms as 'imagination-games'. She continues to assert that 'In the non-artist nature the dream appears, with maturity, to reach the end of its power: it is more than exhausted, it really dies, or if it does not die it remains, like an awkwardness, in some part of the nature, to reappear perhaps in certain phases of love.' ('Children's Play', *Collected Impressions* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1950) pp. 144-146, p.144). 'Awkwardness' is the result of the lingering of childhood desire, its excessive existence half-forgotten but haunting in its returns and repetitions. This cryptic expression is the husk of a long-lost 'imagination-game', displaced by habit; awkwardness, then, articulates melancholia, the failure of complete loss, a cryptic function of the returns of the child's displaced knowledge. Bowen then explains that the writer, in unique contact with childhood, continues these 'imagination-games' which 'demand expression' from 'just over the edge of consciousness'. The 'imagination-games' of childhood fantasy mark the margins of possibility; play continually redefines these margins but can never completely transcend them. Play as a model for writing, then, maintains a connection with the past while transforming its relation to a troublesome, transitory present.

idea of the creative revelation of child's play, replacing it with this querying innocence, a necessary childishness that is entered into the material processes of literary production and joined to a version of literary knowledge that is attuned to these processes. She wonders about the motives behind this return to childhood that she perceives to be so prominent in post-war literature and culture and which she herself designs in her novels:

Is it one's nascent self, one's in-the-bud identity, that one looks for? Or, better, is one really in search of the thing-in-itself – of that independent clearness with which the flint wall, the flight of uphill steps, the reflected arch of the bridge, used to stand out – stand out not blurred, as yet, by too many associations?<sup>203</sup>

Bowen probes whether this Romantic impulse is part of a desire to identify a pre-trauma, pre-fall kernel of the self – an authentic, original identity. Or whether, 'better', this turn to childhood is a manifestation of the desire to know the 'thing-in-itself'; a pre-symbolic recognition of the thickness of material objects. It is this in particular that the theory of the writer-as-child provides for Bowen. She commends, while simultaneously recognising as futile, this search for the 'independent clearness' of materiality; a desire for this unreachable, vanishing clarity haunts her work producing a version of reading the opacity of toys, an opacity which determines the movements of her graceful marionette characters. Her late works become most interesting in this context as they develop the realisation that the only certainty is that this 'independent clearness' can never actually be achieved, even in a work of fiction. Bowen's early novels, in contrast, struggle against her circumlocutory style to reimagine contact with this clarity. In *The House in Paris*, for example, Karen addresses an unborn Leopold at the moment of his conception (p. 151); she then becomes trapped in attempting to imagine and address an impossible innocence. 'He would be the mark our hands did not leave on the grass' (p. 153), thinks Karen; through this incredibly complex image emerges a sense of Karen's naivety. Leopold becomes, in Karen's mind, an object that

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<sup>203</sup> Bowen, 'The Cult of Nostalgia', p. 99.

could embody, in its invisible innocence, the lost relationship that she never had with Max. This is an image of a transient trace, a disappearing negative space that marks momentarily an encounter that never occurred. The body of the child, only at this point imagined not yet born, is made in this image to signify this double negativity: the loss of a disappearing mark of a memory that never existed. These imagined images of loss written onto the material world and made synonymous here with the body of the innocent child, then rub up against the reality of loss as it exists for Leopold. Bowen's essays demonstrate her fascination with the writer's projection onto or appropriation of childhood in this way in an attempt to complete an adult lack of clarity.

Pre-socialisation thus considered, for the most part, unaffected by the fleeting changes of modern culture, "childhood" is invested with the timelessness and predictability of an ontologically stable developmental stage, yet is simultaneously made to embody impulsivity, spontaneity and ludic free-play. Bowen, then, exposes this paradoxical Romantic child as both routine and rupture, knowable and unknowable. In a distinctly modernist break in the continuity of the Romantic child she enters the oblique innocence of toys into the disorder embodied by the silent, troublesome fiction-making of Bowen's larger-than-life heroine Eva Trout.

### 3.2. Occupational 'Pattern-arriving-at'

Bowen's preoccupation with the play of the signifier intensifies in her late works. Mobile signifiers encounter material object producing unpredictable results.<sup>204</sup> Her distinctly poetic

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<sup>204</sup> In 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', Jacques Derrida expounds that 'the organising principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure'; he then argues that man can no longer be considered to be at the centre and that the result of this decentring is 'free play' (*Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 352), positing that 'play is the disruption of presence' (Ibid., p. 369). Bowen's late work occupies this same theoretical moment; although there is no evidence to suggest that she was influenced by these developments, her work similarly imagines an anti-anthropocentric environment in which 'the play of meaning can overflow signification' (Ibid., p. 13).

prose engages in an intimate dissection of the multiplicity of words, scrutinising their sense-making capacity through a Romantic focus on the sounds and shapes of signifiers which transforms the words themselves into *things*. Bowen's unmistakable linguistic style – her teasing use of neologisms and her tortuous manipulation of grammatical and syntactical structures – shares the qualities of a 'ludic discourse', a discourse often associated with the 1960s French Situationist theories of the relationship between work and play which appropriate Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, outlined in the introduction, to utilise what they perceive as its revolutionary potential to suggest that games are ends in themselves.<sup>205</sup> Mobilising Romantic statements from Huizinga's work such as 'Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos',<sup>206</sup> play is characterised by the Situationists as a radically anti-capitalist and anti-deterministic mode of experiencing and interacting with society. Described as 'autonomous' (p. 127) and unable to 'concatenate' (p. 268), Eva is portrayed throughout the novel as embodying the free-play of childhood with the ludic swagger of a pre-social desire. However, the ideological link between play and agency is problematised throughout *Eva Trout*. An irresolvable negativity of consciousness replaces any 'influx of mind' usually represented by child's play. Bowen continually agitates any version of the Situationist ideal in her demonstration of the impossibility of standing solidly outside of society and culture. The novel dramatises the ways in which, despite her various games, Eva's environment *is* shaping her experiences, much to the dismay of her surrounding characters who, to the end, continue to wrongly characterise her choices as 'autonomous'. This is most evident at the novel's dramatic denouement – an accumulation of circumstances, insight into which the

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Differently to Derrida, this environment, for Bowen, is one in which language, despite being in tension with materiality, always returns to it, and as a result of this a productive dialogue between slippery signs and the material world emerges.

<sup>205</sup> Guy Debord, whose work acts as the cornerstone of Situationist theories, focuses on this element of play. (*Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1990) p.81)

<sup>206</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 3.

reader alone has privileged access – at which point materiality in the form of the gun-made-plaything reasserts its power over fiction-making games.

Bowen creates the illusion that Eva's freedom of movement is the result of her unlimited horizonless milieu; a nomad to whom cultural rules are superfluous, Eva appears unbound by social expectations. This, at first, perpetuates the fantasy that Eva has reached a state of simplicity in remove from relations of capital and linguistic structures due to her superabundant wealth. Bowen, however, orchestrates this illusory freedom in order to shatter it through Eva's interactions with impotent toys, such as her toppling book cairn, and with stinging moments of insight into Eva's emotional perspective, for example her lamentation in private conversation with Father Clavering-Haight, the new partner of her guardian Constantine, of her inability to penetrate Henry's and Iseult's world of learning due to her history of displacement (p. 185).

Confined to her room in a fevered malaise Eva contemplates her past, providing the reader with a brief glimpse into the impervious psychic life of Bowen's final protagonist:

Time, inside Eva's mind, lay about like various pieces of a fragmented picture. She remembered, that is to say, disjunctedly. To reassemble the picture was impossible; too many of the pieces were lost, lacking. Yet, some of the pieces there were would group into patterns – patterns at least. Each pattern had a predominant colour; and each probably had meaning, though that she did not seek. Occupationally, this pattern-arriving-at was absorbing, as is a kindergarten game, and, like such a game, made sense in a way. (p. 46)

Bowen places emphasis on the word 'Occupationally' through positioning it at the beginning of the sentence. This emphasis raises questions about the different meanings of occupation; what constitutes a meaningful occupation; the relationship between work, thought, play and art, and the seriousness of these activities. Bowen's toy metaphors similarly foreground concerns regarding her own occupational 'pattern-arriving-at': questions about the conflicted position of the novelist in relation to ideas of work and play. These questions are indicative of prominent twentieth-century anxieties about the changing structures of work and leisure

time and the resulting shift from work-based to leisure-based identities.<sup>207</sup> Bowen's work then presents a way into thinking about what this turn to leisure and play does to representations of the child and adult "embodiments" of childhood, specifically writerly interactions with childhood forms. Twentieth-century philosophical and historical studies of play are similarly preoccupied with the question which haunts Huizinga's work and ultimately comes to undermine its coherence: 'whether our occupations are pursued in play or in earnest'.<sup>208</sup>

Portraying the structure of Eva's thoughts here, Bowen juxtaposes two interlocking images of toys which encourage contrasting versions of play: the jigsaw puzzle and the kaleidoscope. Though both toys take fragmented, tessellating images as their points of interest, the jigsaw puzzle is a teleological game in which meaning is achieved only through the reunification of a definite image. In contrast, the perpetual 'pattern-arriving-at' of Bowen's favourite toy, the kaleidoscope, in which mobile fragments shift, grouping and ungrouping into patterns, requires solely imaginative interaction from the entranced player.<sup>209</sup> The kaleidoscope, reoccurring throughout the novel, provides the foundational image for Bowen's mosaic of memory which participates in the inward-coiling temporal structure of the novel as a whole. In *Eva Trout* toy metaphors frame moments of recollection, but these metaphors do not render Eva's thoughts transparent.

This passage, in which Eva rejects the jigsaw puzzle model in favour of the kaleidoscope, appears to construct a version of literary subjectivity which exposes the tensions between lived experiences and the virtual models imposed on these experiences. The text encourages a misreading and return led by this misconception that Eva is here exposing a pre-existing, private interiority, that she is engaging with an unfiltered reality of

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<sup>207</sup> I have discussed these shifts in the introduction with reference to William Gleason's and Bill Brown's work on this.

<sup>208</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 191.

<sup>209</sup> Bowen declared that the kaleidoscope was the one object that she would require on a desert island in a "Desert Island Discs" interview with Roy Plomley, 11 March 1957, BBC, due to its perpetual newness and 'inexhaustible patterns'. This also illustrates her wry sense of humour – the shape of the kaleidoscope mirroring that of a telescope. Quoted in Moran's 'Elizabeth Bowen's Toys and the Imperatives of Play'.

“authentic” experience. Instead, Eva is making a more complex hermeneutic decision to employ a different reading practice: to read her past differently and in so doing reconfigure its potential. Eva’s kaleidoscopic reading practice generates fictional pasts that form narratives only to undo themselves again in a ‘pattern-arriving-at’ structure. By emphasising the ways in which Eva’s attempt to shift her reading practice works in dialogue with material culture, not in the realm of creative agency or inspiration, Bowen is repositioning the possibility of a critical voice in the novel, a voice which usurps the place of a literary subjectivity. Here the kaleidoscope is not simply a vessel of history; instead it allows for a different way of reading the past in the present. Fiction-making as here a form of reading cannot disturb materiality in any immediate way; nevertheless, fiction orientated around the materiality of toys in this way can produce a critical voice, one that is not necessarily ethical but is capable of pushing knowledge up against the otherwise inaccessible.

The novel’s pattern-arriving-at reading practice follows the logic of the Situationist position regarding play as an end in itself. Bowen’s neologisms often work to complicate relationships between verbs or adjectives and their objects, restaging this pattern-arriving-at at the level of language; she deterritorialises transitive verbs, removing them from their objects, replicating linguistically the battle between sentient objects and marionette characters within the content of all her novels. Bowen misuses words just as her characters misuse objects (for example Eva with her book cairn); in so doing she troubles the boundary between language and materiality in a way that at once distils the objects in her novels and turns words into toys with a world-remaking ability of their own, resembling Maisie’s toy-words. Her formation of the word ‘disjectedly’ transforms the transitive verb ‘disject’, meaning to disperse or dismember,<sup>210</sup> into an unambiguous adverb with the addition of ‘ly’, resembling ‘dejectedly’; ‘remembered’, therefore, becomes an intransitive verb, the adverb

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<sup>210</sup> “disject, v.” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2018) [www.oed.com/view/Entry/54639](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/54639). Accessed 15 May 2018.

‘disjunctedly’ hovering isolated at the end of the sentence describing the scattered fashion of Eva’s psychic motions. The connections between verbs and adverbs then, like the patterns of the kaleidoscope, exist for their own elusive and unreachable ends; they are not shackled to a particular lexicon or to an object or objective as is the case with the rule-bound reunification narrative of the jigsaw puzzle. Rather than employing the phraseology that the reader expects, for example “her memories were disjuncted”, in which memories exist as a static objectified noun, her modification of grammatical and syntactical rules emphasises the continuous, active, subjective processes of remembering. Bowen’s language is intensely reflexive, continually bending back to its roots, haunted by its phonetic and etymological associations;<sup>211</sup> through association with the adverb ‘dejectedly’, remembering, like playing, becomes an intensely serious and sombre process.<sup>212</sup> In addition, both ‘disjunctedly’ and ‘dejectedly’ share an etymological origin in the Latin word ‘jacere’ meaning ‘to throw’ (‘jet’ also shares this origin), reinforcing the dislocated, modern mobility of Eva’s remembering process; a process untied from a particular history which then becomes a continuous roaming of memories.

As a result of the pieces ‘lost, lacking’, conflicts play out within the lacunae, incoherencies and displacements of Eva’s remembered biography. In the novel the jigsaw puzzle functions as a growth metaphor dictating Eva’s future self piece by piece. This method for growing into a complete image aggravates the conflicts in Eva’s displaced biography, leading Eva and the narrator to relate her psychic life to the pattern-arriving-at of the kaleidoscope: a perpetual becoming that depicts, more adequately than the jigsaw puzzle metaphor, the constantly shifting deformation and reformation of memory and identity. The poetic rhythm of Bowen’s hyphenated phrase, ‘pattern-arriving-at’, and the phonetic

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<sup>211</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962) p. 212.

<sup>212</sup> Bowen states in her essay ‘Toys’ that ‘One must remember, play is a serious thing’. (‘Toys’, *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, Allan Hepburn (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2008) pp. 178-182, p. 180).

repetition of ‘at’ sounds at its beginning and end create a rotating onomatopoeic pattern in a doubled articulation of its meaning. Bowen’s hyphenated phrase avoids the status of compound adjective as her pattern-arriving-at does not work to modify a succeeding noun but describes a process in itself. Placing the destination – the pattern – before the journey, Bowen’s hyphenated phrase implies a diffusion of teleology: any arrival is continually undone or “disjuncted” – the kaleidoscope arrives at a pattern only to shift to another in a continuous process of becoming-symmetrical which encourages the discovery of connections and tensions between disparate, incomprehensible memories. It is Iseult who instructs Eva in adopting this mode of thinking in a pattern-arriving-at structure; she explains to Eva,

‘You have thoughts, I know, and sometimes they’re rather startling, but they don’t connect yet.’ ... ‘But try joining things together: this, then that, then the other. That’s thinking; at least, that’s beginning to think.’ ... ‘Till you’ve arrived at something. Or found something out, or shed light on something. Or come to some conclusion, rightly or wrongly. And then what? – then you begin again.’

‘Why, however?’ Eva asked, not unreasonably.

... ‘It’s what is done, Eva.’ (p. 62).

Characters surrounding Eva continually attempt to work out what she is thinking, or indeed decide she does not know how to “think”. Iseult, here, describes thinking as a continuous process of locating patterns only to begin again, a form of purposefulness without definitive purpose. The teleology-for-teleology’s-sake which distinguishes Iseult’s mode of thinking here is, however, misunderstood by Eva; unlike Iseult, Eva’s pattern-arriving-at never arrives at a conclusion. This seemingly unproductive task characterises the inert, satirical mood of the novel and works to mock a readerly desire for closure; literary knowledge, then, is a slippery and illusive objective for the reader.

As well as working to scrutinise what it is to “think” or to “know”, Eva’s interactions with contrasting images of toys foreground the tensions within cultural assumptions about “healthy” growth and development. Teleological developmental narratives, represented by

the jigsaw puzzle, can never be meaningful for Eva because she can never have all the pieces of a past spent in perpetual beginnings. Eva expresses this herself when, in a ghostly echo of the novel's ending, she declares: 'I was *beginning* to be ... she sent me back ... sent me back again – to be nothing. ... I remain gone. Where am I? I do not know – I was cast out from where I believed I was.' (p. 185). Eva never comes of age as the novel's beginning, entitled 'Origins', leads the reader to expect; the novel's rigid, artificial structure frustrates both heroine and reader as Eva's biography fails to fit into any straightforward chronological narrative, such as the *Bildungsroman* implied by the novel's structure, ending with death and disinheritance (Jeremy's uncertain future) in place of marriage and the discovery of lost inheritance. This disconnection between narrative structure and content illustrates the interdependence of humanity and social forces as they coexist in material environments, and in so doing undermines the determination of rigid fictional structures, both Eva's truth games and the novel itself.<sup>213</sup> During her first experience of attending school aged fourteen, in one of few attempts by Eva at socialisation, her peers cannot situate her growth within familiar developmental narratives: appearing not to have reached puberty the children question her gender, accusing her of being a 'hermaphrodite.' (p. 51). Unable to identify with upwards linear models for growth, Eva grows to the side of these structures,<sup>214</sup> described by Mrs Dancey, Henry's mother, as being 'a child at heart' (p. 211) and as unsuitable for marriage (p. 12). Unable to identify with a social or cultural identity due to her rootless childhood, and incapable of growing into a work-based role due to her projected wealth, play continues to dominate her attempts at identity formation.

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<sup>213</sup> Jed Esty analyses Bowen's *The Last September* in his work on modernist appropriations of the *Bildungsroman*. He explores the ways in which this novel blocks 'the attainment of a mature social role' through the plot of displacement (*Unseasonable Youth*, p. 2), and how the figure of youth becomes less and less symbolic of 'history and progress' (Ibid., p. 33).

<sup>214</sup> My analysis of Eva's development is influenced by Stockton's idea of 'sideways growth'. (*The Queer Child*, p. 2).

Toys, in Bowen's novels, at once act as private tools with which to ratify the internal conflicts inherent to socialisation narratives, and resist this role through being strange, disobedient things with a life of their own. In this way, in line with Winnicott's theories on the subject, toys should permit Eva to negotiate the boundary between subject and object, inside and outside. For Eva, however, toys do not simply assist her in the creation of interiority; instead, in Eva's hands they *blur* the boundary between human and non-human, interior and exterior. In the U.S. with Jeremy, 'illusion overspilled on to all beheld. Society revolved at a distance from them like a ferris wheel dangling buckets of people. ... Wasted, civilization extended round them as might acres of cannibalized cars. ... The one wonder, to them, of the exterior world was that anything should be exterior to themselves – and could anything be so and yet exist?' (p. 189). To Eva and Jeremy it seems that their obscure interior sense of themselves encompasses all of reality; removed from society it appears to them as a slow-moving fairground ride in a post-apocalyptic landscape of abandoned waste objects.

### 3.3. Capital Games

Often created as didactic tools in order to foster the desired adult subject, toys reveal the conflicts and tensions within cultural assumptions about the "healthy" growth of the individual: frequently defined by the age-appropriate adoption of an emerging class status and gender role. These prescriptive age-based assumptions about a child's development are emphasised in Bowen's juxtaposition of the jigsaw puzzle and the kaleidoscope. Invented in 1817 as a tool of inspiration for artists and designers, the kaleidoscope engages all ages alike: not demanding arrival at any particular image, it encourages an ongoing process of subjective interaction and aesthetic experience, as opposed to the jigsaw puzzle's rigid model for satisfaction dependent upon difficulty and completion. The mid-nineteenth century saw a large-scale restructuring of play into games as the period began to apply industrialised

methods of mass-production to toy manufacturing.<sup>215</sup> The jigsaw puzzle, invented as a didactic geographical game, is an example of the emerging discourse around how toys and play can be put to work. Published at the turn of the twentieth century, Chamberlain's study of child's play, outlined in the introduction, illustrates the extent of this discourse; he suggests that toys make excellent 'culture-implements' and should be put to work with the purpose of instilling cultural conventions into early childhood.<sup>216</sup> A resurgence of the significance of the image of the kaleidoscope in twentieth-century literature and culture worked against these rigid narratives adopted in toy manufacture. Co-opted by symbolism and then the surrealist movement, the kaleidoscope came to indicate a shift from objective or empirical knowledge to subjective modes of knowing, providing an emphasis on personal interpretations of texts or toys, and in so doing prioritising the viewer's or reader's interaction with the artwork above the artist's or author's intention.<sup>217</sup>

The metaphysical and microcosmic potential of toys and games makes them ideal narrative models through which to capture the dynamics of the relationship between socioeconomic systems and personal identity. The materiality of toys in Bowen's novels, however, defies this role imposed by the writer and, indeed, resists even being cast in child's play for the purpose of negotiation between the self and the world. As discussed in more detail in the introduction, Deleuze suggests that the use of games as models for capitalist

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<sup>215</sup> Kenneth D. Brown, 'Design in the British Toy Industry since 1945', *Journal of Design History*, 11:4 (1998) pp. 323-333, p. 323.

<sup>216</sup> Chamberlain, *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man*, p. 15.

<sup>217</sup> The symbolism movement was inspired by Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which famously uses the kaleidoscope to describe the perspective of the flâneur. The early twentieth-century appropriation of childhood objects, toys and games as imaginative resources for the writer or artist in movements such as surrealism (influenced by the symbolism movement) was accompanied by a corresponding return to the idealisation of the innocent child, an obsessive pursuit of the totality or oneness of the child, and a desire to reclaim the plenitude of witnessing child's play. Roger Caillois's essay entitled 'The Myth of Secret Treasures in Childhood', for example, was published in the 1942 issue of the New York-based surrealist magazine *VVV*. The desire to capture the pure imagination of childhood gave way to a similarly oppressive psychoanalytic fascination with the "irrational woman-child" (David Hopkins, 'Duchamp, Childhood, Work and Play: The Vernissage for First Papers of Surrealism, New York, 1942', *Tate Papers*, 22 (Autumn 2014)). For this reason, it is problematic to think about the work of women writers in relation to the writer-as-child paradigm. Bowen, however, does clearly engage with the theory in a complex and critical way as an interest with particular implications for the work of writing in her contemporary moment.

socioeconomic systems is motivated by their implicit didactic binary models, both moral (good-bad) and economic (means-ends).<sup>218</sup> A focus on toys in place of games in Bowen's writing results in a novel in which these virtual models are returned to materiality, and ends, therefore, can never justify means because ends are multiple and continuous. This emphasis on materiality also shatters moral models in the novel; Eva's truth games are clearly cruel but her death at the end does not appear to be Bowen's way of holding Eva to account for her cruelty. Eva is unable to identify with the game models of means and ends, success and failure, represented by the jigsaw puzzle, due to her social and cultural isolation and her abundant inheritance. Her relationship to capital is not mediated by a game-system economy. Instead, her ludic, free-flowing desire coupled with her superabundant, unearned wealth means that she is perceived by those around her as having a dangerous relationship with capital; her relationship with capital fragments ideas of responsibility and skill that maintain the symbolic justification for economic models of identity. Through Eva's relationship with toys, Bowen exposes the tensions between different models of games and play and explores how the channelling of play into a restricted game format naturalises relations of capital. Although the characters closest to Eva, her guardian Constantine and love-interest Henry, both suggest that Eva needs a 'social purpose', she diffuses the channelling of her play into any productive forms; as Constantine puts it, Eva stays 'locked up with [her] demented fantasies and invented memories' (p. 103). Crucially, however, this subversion does not bring her satisfaction or, indeed, freedom.

This appropriation of play into capitalist socioeconomic structures gave rise to a post-lapsarian lamentation of an imagined lost past of unstructured "free-play" which defines theories of play in the twentieth century; this attitude suffuses Huizinga's work in which he suggests that 'with the increasing systematization and regimentation of sport, something of

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<sup>218</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 59.

the pure play-quality is inevitably lost'.<sup>219</sup> Frankfurt School theorists, such as Adorno, similarly follow a post-Marxist tradition of looking to child's play in this way to locate an anti-capitalist mode of engagement with objects or things.<sup>220</sup> In 'Free Time', Adorno critiques the emptiness of sanctioned leisure activities and the feeding of creative action into these socially acceptable activities.<sup>221</sup> Adorno turns to child's play in his essay 'Toy Shop', in contrast to adult leisure activities, in order to make a point about the relationship between people and things, specifically how things are appropriated by being made to occupy the role of commodity. He suggests that the child, unlike the adult, perceives the tension between the material object and its exchange value, and in order to resist this he/she marshals the 'purposeless activity' of play as a radical temporality through which to 'purify' things of their appropriation as commodities, and in so doing return them to their material form, their unmediated use value, in the present. Explaining his theory, he writes that, in child's play 'The little truck travels nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not performing, not participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny, but instead abide as allegories of what they are specifically for.'<sup>222</sup> The truck does not have a destination and carries only empty cargo; returned to the potential of its materiality here through child's play, the truck refuses the administration and consequent abstraction of its destination. Adorno, then, locates the possibility of art and theory in the unalienated experience of play; participating in a Schillerian concept of art (while criticising Schiller's bourgeois perspective on 'freedom'), he finds the autonomy of art in its likeness to

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<sup>219</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p.197.

<sup>220</sup> In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno responds to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, critiquing it but developing the connection made in this work between seriousness and play. (*Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002) p. 318).

<sup>221</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 187.

<sup>222</sup> Adorno, 'Toy Shop', p. 228. Instead of existing only as an abstracted allegory for the flows of capital, for the movement of goods from one location to another as part of a capitalist infrastructure, the allegory is reversed and they are returned to their thingness as objects that move regardless of destination. The use of the truck and empty barrels in Adorno's example of this cannot be overlooked; in the context of *Minima Moralia* they act as a reminder of the concentration camps, the material infrastructure that made them possible and the abstraction that made them invisible.

child's play, as stemming from its refusal of the purposiveness dominating society.<sup>223</sup> In work on the role of fun in Adorno's aesthetics, Eric Weitzman specifies that, for Adorno, 'Like autonomous art ... the play of the child is a chance at restoring the enchantment of a disenchanted world through "purposeless activity".'<sup>224</sup> The novel, for Bowen, is not autonomous, and neither is child's play; child's play does, however, restore a certain enchantment of fiction eroded by the purposiveness of the novel form through the diffusion of destination in a pattern-arriving-at reading practice.

Bowen's work grapples with the intensification of this turn to play which, as she explains in 'The Bend Back' mentioned earlier, she perceives to be the result of a nostalgic post-war mood supported by the Romantic fantasy of a truer more real childhood untouched by cultural trauma or the vacillations of capital. Her novels test the idea that the child's knowledge "revealed" in his/her play might redeem a traumatised post-war language. She performs this assessment by setting child's play against the material world; the child's mind, then, is not pure or one with the environment, but exists only in dialogue with a material culture which resists it and prompts it in numerous ways. Bowen's essay 'Toys' goes some way to reinventing a discourse which unproblematically locates, and in so doing fetishizes, a form of pure play that might exist beyond material objects. This essay analyses recent advances in toy making and probes the imaginative benefits and drawbacks of increasingly life-like mechanical toys, questioning if we are 'in danger of toys that forbid play', and in so doing situates toys to some extent at odds with child's play.<sup>225</sup> Nevertheless, she imagines that the ideal toy would, indeed, have 'an outside magic, something not known before ... Invention, and high invention, should have gone to its making – for, to give absolute joy the toy should open another epoch ... Toys for today must be the toys *of* today.'<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 317.

<sup>224</sup> Eric Weitzman, 'No "Fun": Aporias of Pleasure in Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory"', *The German Quarterly*, 81:2 (spring 2008) pp. 185-202, p. 189.

<sup>225</sup> Bowen, 'Toys', p. 182.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

Notwithstanding this modern toy of high invention, she concludes this essay with what she considers to be the most important class of toy: the ‘non-representative’ toy. These toys, she writes, ‘are not copies; they are not concrete fairy-tales; they are “things that one does other things with.”’<sup>227</sup> They are, then, “things” to be transformed into something else; their value lies in this malleable use. In this sense they both are and are not tools; the kaleidoscope, for example, allows you to see the world differently but leads nowhere. The ability of child’s play, then, to provide a radical alternative mode of being, or to articulate the truths of childhood knowledge, is limited in Bowen’s novels. The toy does not gain autonomy through child’s play in Bowen’s work, and neither is it a completely autonomous art object; there are, however, multiple agencies of *things* competing with child’s play. For Bowen, not all toys, even when played with, have a relationship with art, and when they do, this relationship is still bound to the thingness of toys. Bowen’s ‘non-representative’ toys, like the kaleidoscope, nevertheless, signify the convergence of play and art in their occupation of a negative space; in contrast, the jigsaw puzzle encourages a movement from play to work. The jigsaw puzzle is a game that naturalizes the abstractions necessary for governing relations of capital to function, instilling into play the concept of a task to be completed; each piece is meaningful only in relation to the other and to the purpose of completing the whole, reinforcing the economic models of success and failure, means and ends.

In *Eva Trout* the established social narrative for growth is represented by the jigsaw puzzle metaphor; the metaphor participates in the narrative that an entire set of relevant pieces, positioned in the correct order, will complete the *correct* and only available picture. The jigsaw puzzle, for Bowen, then is both representative and symbolic in a way that the kaleidoscope often resists. The jigsaw puzzle first appears in Bowen’s work in a simile in her first novel in which it conveys the complexities of social relations: ‘Society was fascinating,

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

so like a jigsaw puzzle!’<sup>228</sup> Society, like the jigsaw puzzle maintains its fragile surface through delicate and perfectly interlocking pieces; the cracks, however, remain visible.<sup>229</sup> *Eva Trout* illustrates that, in its uncertain world in which social forms for identity formation no longer meet the demands of a modern psyche, a model for the growth of identity in which people must have all the pieces of identity in place – nationality, culture, occupation – can no longer be meaningful. Through this social narrative Eva relates her psychic experience of the interplay between identity and memory to a broken toy (p. 46): a broken jigsaw puzzle lacking all the relevant pieces, memories or components (a nationality, home, family, culture or work-based occupation) that enable a person to create an identity in accordance with developmental narratives such as those which dominate novelistic traditions (for example the *Bildungsroman*). The value of the unified, complete image is, however, abandoned by the novel and the broken toy provided with a different function, ‘a kaleidoscope also in which the inside reflector was cracked’ generating the novel’s chancy temporal and formal ‘convulsions’.<sup>230</sup>

Travelling rapidly through the city of Cambridge in the back of a Taxi with Henry and Jeremy, Eva experiences the same conflict between her internal emotions and external motions that she experienced in her earlier fevered malaise: ‘On their way to the station, she sat locked in an anguish nobody could explain – across her, the other two played cat’s-cradle with the cord off a cake box. ... This was a forever she had no part in’ (p. 180). Bowen’s ‘forceful ... imperatives of play’<sup>231</sup> heighten in moments of transit when characters are

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<sup>228</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel* (London: Vintage, 2003) p. 8.

<sup>229</sup> Deleuze’s work on the temporal problem of philosophy, namely how to construct concept that will remain meaningful over time, similarly employs the jigsaw puzzle metaphor to depict the process by which relations between people, things and concepts are forged: ‘Not even a puzzle, whose pieces when fitted together would constitute a whole, but rather a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others.’ (Gilles Deleuze, ‘Bartleby; Or, the Formula’, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) pp. 68-91, p. 86).

<sup>230</sup> Describing *The Heat of the Day* in a way that also applies to *Eva Trout* Bowen states ‘I wanted to show people in extremity, working on one another’s characters and fates all the more violently because they worked by chance.’ (‘A conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke’, *Listening In*, pp. 274-287, p. 283).

<sup>231</sup> Bowen, ‘Toys’, p. 178.

temporally and spatially displaced, manifesting in non-representative games or toys formed out of the transformation of waste objects. The ‘nascent tension’ (p. 158) between Henry and Jeremy, as though they might both be predicting the future, materialises in this complex game of ‘pattern-arriving-at’ in which the purpose is to form increasingly complex patterns as the players become ever more intricately entwined together. The game works through a rhythmic slackening and tautening of strings mirroring the deformation and reformation of patterns in the kaleidoscope. Crucially, both the kaleidoscope and cat’s-cradle produce a cathartic stillness in their players which contrasts with the rapidity of their fleeting encounters, and both have no obvious endpoint, therefore symbolising a ‘forever’ in which Eva feels unable to participate. Some games and toys, such as these, exist endlessly into the future and become the rites and rituals of growing up. This never-ending temporality without destination excludes both Eva and the reader, as the temporality of the novel folds back on itself predicting Eva’s death and reminding the reader that, despite the disruption of a *Bildungsroman* structure, the novel itself must at some point end.<sup>232</sup>

Following this insight, rather than attempt to depict the cause and shape of Eva’s inexplicable anguish, Bowen returns to Eva’s kaleidoscopic consciousness – a chancy, fractured consciousness not a stable thinking subjectivity – to show how she envisages the future. The text then traces Eva’s observation of the innumerable intricacies of life flying past from the back seat of the car in a collage of impermanence:

The eternity was the more real to her for consisting of fiery particles of transience – bridges the punt slid under, raindrops spattering the Cam with vanishing circles, shivered reflections, echoes evaporating, shadows metamorphosing, distances shifting, glorification coming and

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<sup>232</sup> Marcel Duchamp’s ‘mile of string’ installation at the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in New York in 1942, covered the room in a giant game of cat’s-cradle in order to disturb the viewer’s relationship with their position in the space, to preclude their movements and obstruct the artworks. He then invited children to play games within the space, weaving in and out of the networks of string. This incursion of play into the gallery worked to critique the culture industry: the blurring of work and leisure in the accumulation of cultural capital and the consequent instrumentalization of the viewing of art. (Hopkins, ‘Duchamp, Childhood, Work and Play’). Bowen’s use of cat’s-cradle similarly entangles the reader in a forever of play which makes them aware of the temporality of reading as a pastime and its relationship with production.

going on buildings at a whim of the sun, grass flashing through arches, gasps of primitive breath coming from stone, dusk ebbing from waxen woodwork when doors opened. Holy pillars flowed upward and fountained out, round them there being *a ceaseless confluence of fanatical colours burningly staining glass. Nothing was at an end, so nothing stood still.* (p. 181, emphasis added)

Despite being in constant flight, Eva remains an observer of the world passing by her, revolving as if on a ferris wheel; still like a statue, she cannot share in the forever of this image. The interweaving patterns of Eva's microperceptions are mirrored in the intricate webbing of the cat's-cradle game in which she has found herself enmeshed. Her history of displacement is, then, superimposed onto the fleeting microperceptions. The forever of never-ending games merges here with the pace of change in Eva's environment. The speed of this tangled montage is reinforced by Bowen's convoluted syntax. Bowen's selection of verbs – 'evaporating', 'metamorphosing', 'shifting', 'flashing' – reflect a modern world in constant flux; situated within an elongated sentence littered with frequent commas, the precariousness, speed and mobility of Eva's experience is, then, echoed in the reading experience. The kaleidoscope re-emerges here in the 'fanatical colours burningly staining glass' and the taxonomy of perceptions reproduces the intense, framed solipsism of the kaleidoscope's patterns. Eva's perception of her suffocating situation is depicted in an intensely focalised style; consequently, in parts the reader finds the coalescing details impossible to disentangle into separate images. Rather they form a sweeping moving image projected onto the 'burningly stained' glass of the car window. The indistinguishable surfaces of passing buildings, wet from rain, reflect the running interfusion of the colours surrounding them – objects become ambiguous, replaced by descriptions of sliding movements, shapes and hues. Cambridge is depicted here with the mysticism and awe of a religious experience; 'flashing' like a Wordsworthian 'spot of time', this moment of heightened emotion imbues each detail with the vibrancy and intensity of play. The cathedral-like description indicates

how, for Eva, the unknown of Cambridge's culture of learning holds a sacred, inaccessible transcendence which joins ritual and play in Eva's kaleidoscopic perspective.

Eva experiences Cambridge as steeped in tradition and symbolic of a form of "civilization" that she has no relationship with, it is as a result of this that 'Eva was set upon by the swamping, isolating misery of the savage' (p. 181); she is made "savage" by the over-refinement of her environment. The illusory, pre-social free-play of Eva's desires is a product of her isolation from the 'restricting influence' of cultural convention; however, it is due to this inability to engage with the socialisation process that she experiences an advancing displacement from Henry's life and from the other virtual identities she has engineered for herself.<sup>233</sup> Through its pattern-arriving-at structure and the accompanying, illusory free-play of its moribund protagonist, Bowen's final novel maps potential new routes that this negotiation between individual desire and cultural convention might take in the novel.

The image of the kaleidoscope dominates the form of the novel: the symmetry-in-motion of Bowen's kaleidoscopic temporality provides the framework through which the novel's 'pattern-arriving-at' reading process emerges. The novel bends back through the reminiscence of characters adjacent to Eva's life; in this act of return Eva's kaleidoscopic temporality infects the memories of other characters, for example in Constantine's description of being alone with Eva when she was a child: 'The whole thing was peculiar, all wraiths and spirals' (p. 106). Through Bowen's orchestration of a helical formation, time in the novel slides instead of progressing in a linear fashion, emerging only in changing patterns and relations. At its end the novel bends back to haunt its beginning; the final chapter of the novel is entitled 'This is where we were to have spent our honeymoon', ending Eva's story with her declaration that forms the very first line of the novel. With the novel's ending ominously surfacing throughout, the reader is pulled towards Eva's inevitable demise.

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<sup>233</sup> In an interview, Bowen scrutinises the value of cultural convention only to conclude that writers and thinkers have not sufficiently examined the double-bind of convention, 'how conventions are aids rather than hinderances to social life.' ('Do conventions matter?', *Listening In*, pp. 295-304, p. 301).

Time within the novel moves through a continuous process of inward folding: with each fold the underside or underlying cause of the novel's final dramatic event is partially revealed, creating an awkward symmetry between emotions, motivations and motions within the novel. These supple, reflective folds in the novel generate its mirrored geometric plot structure, reproducing the process by which the patterns in a kaleidoscope are formed through an assembly of objects, angles and mirrors in motion. This reflective folding encourages the merging of Eva's experience of time with the reader's experience of the novel's wider temporal structure, and in so doing implicates the reader in the occupational pattern-arriving-at of the writer. For Bowen, the time (the present period in relation to temporality itself) provides the subject of the novel. Forming a hopeful definition of modernism, literature, she proposes, should work like the forever of cat's-cradle, not like a toppling cairn, it should exist to be used in the present not to stand as a monument to the past.<sup>234</sup> Pursuing this idea of a continuous forever that does not deny the past, she suggests that the present is infused with the past so cannot but engage with it in some form. Nevertheless, she refuses the idea that the novel should have a purpose other than fiction-making, producing a story or plot which grapples with the present to move literary knowledge into the future.

### 3.4. Exhausting the Reckless Tricyclist

The temporal economy of play is dramatised in the novel as the 'heroic simplification' of time in childhood in which 'everything shapes to drama'.<sup>235</sup> The simplification of the time of

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<sup>234</sup> Discussing contemporary art and then contemporary writing in 'Subject and the Time', Bowen explains her view on the value of writing the contemporary and the value of the contemporary moment for writing: 'We salute the "timeless" because it seems to exclude our own nagging modern disorder – our frustrated, our haunted, taunted uneasiness with regard to what is our own time. But, for that very reason, the art of the past has a lacking element – an element only to be supplied, at whatever cost in harshness or inconvenience, by art which *is* contemporary with us.' ('Subject and the Time', *Listening In*, pp. 147-153, p. 148).

<sup>235</sup> Bowen, 'The Bend Back', p.57.

child's play influences Bowen's intimate connection between an economics of writing *in* time and 'childishness' as an ecstatic and dramatic aesthetic mode. She describes a tension between these two impulses; writing *in* time means, for Bowen, daring to grapple with the truth of the present: responding both to the forces influencing literary production and the passing of time in the occupation of writing and reading.

The style of Bowen's writing in turn removes a sense of normality from the reading practice, it defamiliarises reading and puts it to work. Constantine, Eva's closest ally, shares Eva's remove from conventional forms of familial or work-based identity: "The soul", he said, admiring the facades, 'of normality. We are outsiders, Eva' (p. 169). This snippet of dialogue is structured in order to encourage a second reading, a revisiting. Complex, teasing sentence structure such as this is indicative of Bowen's subtle, witty style. This sentence manipulates the reader into misreading it as "the façades of normality"; bending back encourages the reader to perceive this as the playful voice of the narrator breaking up the dialogue to undermine any sense of 'normality,' and implies that Eva and Constantine are outsiders only because they struggle to uphold the façade, not due to any essential abnormality. Playfulness of style here departs from Bowen's querying innocence, but this witty dialogue is structured in a way which still forces the reader to look again at the concept of 'normality'. Bowen's querying innocence is a reading practice unique to the writer, but her novels encourage her readers to share in this by returning them to childhood; this return to childhood is written into the style of her novels which are structured, both on the level of sentence and the structure of the whole, around a revisiting which forces readers into a position of re-reading.

Eva, Jeremy and Constantine are hedged-out of the paradisiacal gardens belonging to these grand facades, situating them as onlookers in a fallen state, unable to play in the gardens. Eva is joined to the narrative of *The Fall* by name, her erratic desires drawing her to dangerous events. The garden, however, quickly reveals itself to be, not an Edenic space

of free-play, but a contained space saturated with convention and bound by administration. Constantine reads aloud to the others the message posted on the garden gate:

“No bicycles are allowed. Tricycles are allowed on the paths only.” – That would never suit you, Eva, you reckless tricyclist. – “Ball games and dangerous pastimes not permitted.” Dangerous pastimes? No place for any of us.’ (p. 170).

Eva is in perpetual flight; constantly speeding off in her Jaguar or disappearing overseas without a trace, her life is perceived as one unstoppable dangerous pastime. The moral dangers that other characters associate with Eva’s otiose life of leisure are mocked here by Constantine as he wryly yet affectionately repeats the ambiguous veto of ‘dangerous pastimes’. Constantine includes himself in this ironic exclusion, alluding sarcastically to his sexuality as a “dangerous pastime”.

The novel raises questions about what it means to *pass*-time in a world where ‘nothing stood still’; is Eva’s occupational pattern-arriving-at her most dangerous pastime? Or does any “pastime” become dangerous in this context? There is an economy of time in the novel and pastimes, then, operate within relations of capital, imbued with the language of work. Pastimes are ways to *spend* time; leisure time, therefore, is commodified and commands a high value, as Chamberlain asserts, it is ‘reserve capital’ to be spent wisely.<sup>236</sup> Fear of the play that might occur in this unstructured “free” time means that structured activities, such as games, are encouraged in order to reinforce work-based identity models and to reintroduce “productivity” and systems-based thinking into private “free” time; Henry, for example, tries his best to imagine a role for Eva, to fix her ludic disporting spatially to the role of hostess. Characterising certain pastimes as “dangerous” emphasises the paradoxical routine and rupture of play. The notice subtly articulates a social fear around the dangers of people having “free time”, a fear examined scathingly in Adorno’s essay ‘Free Time’ mentioned earlier. From her first novel, *The Hotel*, to her last, the spectre of leisure has always ‘weighed down’

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<sup>236</sup> Chamberlain, *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man*, p. 14.

Bowen's ultra-privileged characters.<sup>237</sup> A pastime is a diversion and thus, through etymological association, assumes a veering or perversion from a "natural" route or purpose.<sup>238</sup> The idea of the perverse pastime haunts Eva's relationship to capital; as discussed earlier, Eva is considered a social and economic danger in that her relationship with her inherited, unearned wealth does not obey any predetermined economic or cultural formulas for its expenditure. Eva's lack of division between work-time and free-time means she is unable to understand the economy of time that operates in the diegetic world of the novel. Although she fixes her pregnancy fiction temporally to make it real, concepts such as sequence or age do not apply to her: Eva seems to have little sense of time passing as memories penetrate the present and Jeremy grows up in silence.

Play, for Bowen, is an expression of free-flowing desire which dissolves all boundaries – it is through the funnelling of play into didactic forms such as toys and games that it perpetuates attachments to the culturally specific temporalities of work, or indeed, art. Nevertheless, play is often refused or stumped by the materiality of toys; toys are broken, packed away, have their use stifled by social rules and regulations or, if accessible, are completely disobedient. In work on this tension between toys and play Bernstein critiques theoretical investments in a 'top-down system in which adults produce culture and children receive it', analysing the Romantic fears that circulate around the child's relationship with cultural forms as a result of this paradigm. She argues that this 'erases the ways in which children's play performances revise rather than only reify narratives.'<sup>239</sup> The tricycle as an object might invite freedom and mobility for the child, however, this freedom is always disingenuous: there is little room to be reckless with a tricycle. Nevertheless, here it is seemingly pointlessly immobilised by social fears and regulations. Children at play in Bowen's

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<sup>237</sup> Bowen, *The Hotel*, p. 149.

<sup>238</sup> "diversion, n." *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2018) [www.oed.com/view/Entry/56060](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/56060). Accessed 16 May 2018.

<sup>239</sup> Robin Bernstein, 'Children's books, dolls, and the performance of race; or, the possibility of children's literature', *PMLA*, 126:1 (2011) pp. 160-169, p. 163.

novels often attempt to revise the narratives scripted for them by toys, but these revisions have multiple, unpredictable and sometimes deadly consequences. Dangerous and endangered, the play of Bowen's child characters always leads back to the material consequences of these play performances and the material objects which script these performances. This is not done in a moralistic way but works to create an oppressively inert atmosphere, a stillness within a plot that shifts rapidly in space and time.

In an overtly Romantic move towards simpler forms, Eva escapes from the over-cultivated savagery of the roaring Jaguar which devours space and time, replacing it with a bicycle to endow her movement with the freedom of play. Nevertheless, when Eva attempts to change the pace of her life through substituting the Jaguar for a bicycle, mocked here in the reference to the recklessness of tricycling, her movement is again halted by social expectations. In moments like this and through a proliferation of symbolic references to toys such as cat's-cradle, jigsaw puzzles and kaleidoscopes, the novel draws attention to *itself* as a 'dangerous pastime'. The idea of writing, or indeed reading, as a dangerous pastime unsettles our reading practices, entering volatility into mundane routine. This ironic emphasis on the dangers of the everyday highlights the immobilising temporal paradox of the Romantic child: spontaneity coupled with stillness; simultaneous predictability and unpredictability. Stilling or paradoxically accelerating time, the pastime eludes the present and in so doing situates the player beyond or outside of time. The shocking climax of the novel, however, mocks the reader for engaging in a reading practice that resembles Eva's reckless tricycling; a reading practice that anticipates the plot, hopes for surprise while taking comfort in identifying patterns within the narrative, and embraces narrative dangers while all the time trusting in a position of readerly distance. The reckless tricyclist, who seeks rebellion within limits, embodies Bowen's critique of the all-too-earnest writer and reader. The pattern-arriving-at reading practice which develops in the novel, transforming the reader's position along with the writer's into the diversion of the pastime, similarly mocks the seriousness of the

suspicious reader who makes it their occupation to search for patterns in Bowen's novels only to see them unravel again.

In *Eva Trout*, patterns on the surface do not reveal something hidden underneath. Similarly, the unravelling of these patterns does not provide a reparative reading; instead, being released from the pattern only to enter into it again produces an exhausted and inert form of reading. While mocking this position, Bowen simultaneously alludes to the insecurity of reading as a pastime; exhibiting the interplay of misreadings between adults and children. The novel's final tragic scene, for example, works only because the crowd fatally misread the gun, considering it a toy, harmless due to the child hand holding it. In her exhaustion the reader is returned as a non-reader to the examples of material objects such as toys puncturing the plot, and engages with literature in the same way Eva does, now acutely aware of the ways in which imposing narratives of childhood mean we only half-read and half-invent stories. There is a sense here that Bowen feels that the difficulty of modernist texts demands a level of obedience from the reader which is passive, accepting, unchallenging; the reader is encouraged, not to be a reckless tricyclist, but to be radical in what they are willing to accept from a story, to desire to take a risk enough to stay with the text to the end.

Although Bowen mocks the all-too-earnest writer, she also critiques the role of the wholly irresponsible writer-as-child who perpetuates the pervasive nostalgic illusion of access to timeless purity, a simplicity beyond artifice, thought to be accessible by appropriating the knowledge "revealed" during child's play. In 'The Cult of Nostalgia', mentioned earlier, she warns that: 'One of the dangerous powers of the writer is that he feeds, or plays up to, the fantasies he knows to exist.'<sup>240</sup> Though this quotation, taken in isolation might appear to be a moralising maxim, out of place in Bowen's work, embracing the 'dangerous pastime' of writing becomes an aesthetic mode for experiencing a precarious, transitory present. Rather than exploiting cultural fantasies for personal gain, Bowen's humble 'querying innocence'

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<sup>240</sup> Bowen, 'The Cult of Nostalgia', p. 97.

puts pressure on cultural practices. *Eva Trout*, then, exposes the ways in which the figure of the child, interwoven with cultural fantasies, enters a false anachronistic stillness into the precarious present of lived experience. Eva's stillness exists in tension with her dangerous pastimes which occupy the dislocated time of child's play, a temporality which resembles the instantaneous forever of Leopold's imagined letter. In this context, Bowen's presentation of her heroine's kaleidoscopic consciousness can be read as a final declaration of incompleteness: a diffusion of the developmental narrative of the writer and an accompanying return to fictionality in the face of the dissolution of the novel form.

In becoming the negative space of fiction, the child resists reading with tragic consequences. There is no power in the child's resistance; in the end it only leads to stasis, the post-death forever of Jeremy's running: 'Jeremy could not stop running on. A woman bystander to whom nothing was anything had the quickest reflex – she snatched him back before he could fall over the dead body.' (p. 268). Bowen's focus on plot as a way of encouraging a version of reading the materiality of toys endangers the child at the same time as making the child a danger. Jeremy's secretive, non-verbal experience is perceived to be withholding unsettling, uncanny insights and is branded a form of telepathy, similarly to Leopold's fictional letter in *The House in Paris*; confronted with the child telepath, adult knowledge becomes a dangerous unstoppable 'leakage' (p. 158) and childhood knowledge all the more mysterious. Jeremy learns to lip-read in order to grow, like Maisie, invisibly in the delay of his disability. In Bowen's last two novels, this intensifying fear of children and the hidden knowledge of a body lacking consciousness is fused with adult insecurities around displacement and obsolescence: the fear that as the pace of change accelerates with technological advancements a new 'race' of children will overtake the knowledge of adults – forecasting their death, accelerating their ignorance and irrelevance. In *The Little Girls*, an aging Dinah references *The Midwich Cuckoos* to explain her companion Fred's desperate fear of his own grandchildren: his all-pervasive anxiety that a 'hostile race' of usurpers could be

born at any moment.<sup>241</sup> The paranoia of the nuclear age which defines the emotional and cultural landscape of this novel, transforms the fixed nostalgic figure of the child into a slippery disconcerting image of an uncertain, threatening future.<sup>242</sup> This fear intensifies around the figure of the orphan child, like Eva and Jeremy; an infecund Eva represents a version of a futureless forever populated by parentless children.

It is their status as orphans which means that these children remain ‘estranged from ... the language that might allow a subject’s self-positioning’;<sup>243</sup> toys, for Leopold, Eva and Jeremy, then replace speech. Eva and Jeremy, Bowen’s most complete examples of marionette characters, involve fiction-making in a death-driven project beyond language at which point the materiality of the *plaything* reasserts itself. For Bowen, the possibility of fiction resides in releasing fiction-making from what she perceives as the morally loaded purposiveness of the novel form; fiction-making, instead, relies upon an exhausted reader entering into the negative space of becoming-toys. Nevertheless, a hopeful definition of modernism emerges out of the inertia her novels provoke; an idea that fiction should be written for its use in the present. Indeed, mocking the all-too-earnest writer and reader does not mean that Bowen is refusing to take writing seriously; rather she is probing the writer’s relationship with their occupation and the ways in which writing itself challenges an understanding of work and play as mutually exclusive modes of being. If Bowen’s late novels make any space for a critical voice, it is a voice which emerges out of the dissolution of the novel; fiction-making meets toys with a world of their own which disrupt a teleological reading and, in this disruption, form a critical voice which resembles the errant, querying innocence of the writer. Although there is a Romantisation of the writer inherent to this idea

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<sup>241</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Little Girls* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964) p. 229.

<sup>242</sup> Walter Benjamin identifies an early twentieth-century dehumanisation of children, stating that ‘People have now discovered the grotesque, cruel, and grim side of children’s life.’ (‘Old Toys: The Toy Exhibition at the Markishes Museum’ (1928), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1999) pp. 98-103, p. 101).

<sup>243</sup> Sinéad Mooney, ‘Unstable Compounds: Bowen’s Beckettian Affinities’, *MFS*, 53:2 (summer 2007) pp. 238-256, p. 251.

of querying innocence, for Bowen, both fiction-making and literary knowledge are mediated by unruly toys; the “pure” inspiration of the writer-as-child is precluded continuously by this mediation. DeLillo, on the other hand, attempts to return these toys to historical time, but in so doing simultaneously capture once again the child’s secretive knowledge of language. It is through this examination of where children are placed in history, that he believes he might redeem the novel form; to foster in the novel an ethics of speaking or being history.

## 4.

The ‘Gamesmanship of Fiction’<sup>244</sup> and the Pure Games of Don DeLillo’s  
Postmodern Wild Child

*A sense of games and half-made selves*<sup>245</sup>

The loss of material history in Don DeLillo’s fiction, and the many attempts to reclaim it, departs from the nostalgic inertia of Bowen’s late fiction. The processual becoming of Bowen’s fiction-making refuses the final object, the novel itself, and instead emphasises the irresolvable relationship between writer and reader. DeLillo’s novels, in contrast, attempt to fasten fiction to material history; the novel, then, becomes a lasting monument to the writer’s formal mastery. *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo’s most formally ambitious and widely acclaimed novel, maps the route that fiction takes out of the Cold War into the shiftier realms of global capital. Writing, for DeLillo, moves from being a game which models specific Cold War concerns of knowability and identity within a discrete set of options, to an attempt to return the novel to ethical versions of literary knowledge tied to questions of the relationship between form, history and representation, an ethics which is not foregrounded in this way in novels by James or Bowen.

DeLillo continuously revisits the image of the writer-as-child to revise his relationship with literary production. In work on DeLillo, Peter Boxall, like James Berger, David Cowart and others, suggests that DeLillo does not simply adopt a Deleuzian idea of the impossibility of establishing a critical space from which to critique the culture industry but instead, attempts to redeem the possibility of a critical voice by fashioning what Boxall

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<sup>244</sup> Don DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star* (London: Vintage, 1991) p. 306. All subsequent references will appear in text marked R.S.

<sup>245</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1999) p. 103. All subsequent references will appear in text marked U.

calls a 'critical negativity'.<sup>246</sup> Boxall locates this negativity in the deathly, black pages which appear throughout *Underworld*, in what he terms 'the unspeakability of the interval'. This, he claims, 'testifies to the novel's failure to recuperate the past, to absorb the moment of origin ... into an apocalyptic presence.'<sup>247</sup> Bowen's novels touch upon this 'apocalyptic presence' refused in DeLillo's work. Leopold's origin fiction in *The House in Paris*, and Eva's fictions around Jeremy's origins in *Eva Trout*, fail (in different ways) the novels' own tests of belief, but in so doing produce the negative space in which, for Bowen, resides the possibility of fiction written onto childhood innocence as an irresolvable lack. In contrast to Bowen's marionette bodies, DeLillo's characters are haunted by the subjectivity they are supposed to have lost or, indeed, never had; this subjectivity returns in uncanny repetitions of a pre-linguistic childhood speech of whispers. Like Boxall, Berger discusses DeLillo's concern with the 'unsymbolizable gaps in the symbolic';<sup>248</sup> he argues that these gaps take the form of linguistically impaired postmodern wild children who 'embod[y] the full traumatic-transcendent possibilities of human existence outside language',<sup>249</sup> and in so doing act as a way of discovering an unmediated, non-linguistic 'core'.<sup>250</sup> The Romantic image of a pre-symbolic wild child was developed as a site of transcendence of socio-linguistic structures; DeLillo's postmodern wild children inherit this legacy of structural revolution. The ferocious wild child in DeLillo's novels is both insatiable consumer and innocence consumed. His novels, then, raise the question: is being under threat from capital, or even being threatening towards it, written innately into the Romantic child paradigm of innocent child's play? *Underworld* reclaims the threatening dimension of this paradigm; the child does not represent a queer absence of future as in Bowen's late novels, rather he/she is reinvested with the

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<sup>246</sup> Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 12.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>248</sup> James Berger, 'Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo and Turns Against Language', *PMLA*, 120:2 (March 2005) p. 344.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 349.

weight of a darkening future and transformed into a post-apocalyptic presence which might bring about the return of history.<sup>251</sup>

In work on DeLillo's 'Romantic metaphysics', Paul Maltby discusses a tendency in his fiction 'to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at the possibility for cultural regeneration.'<sup>252</sup> DeLillo, like James, experiments with games as models for interpretation and novelistic structure. Games in DeLillo's work are ahistorical situations of pure structure. His novels, however, illustrate how game structures fail to provide the 'transcendent moments' that his characters seek, they never fulfil their promise of invariable, ahistorical systems of meaning. It is, instead, through entering a postmodern wild child *into* a culture eroded by the hegemony of global capital, not through positing the wild child as a possible outside to structure but rather as a product of it, that *Underworld* suggests a precarious hope for cultural change.

The wild child, conceived by the Romantic poets through building on the Lockean idea of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, was imagined in response to a growing suspicion that the root of the social degeneration they perceived could be traced to a language over-burdened by the adornment, and consequent ambiguity, of meaning. They hoped, therefore, that through the "discovery" of a pre-social and pre-symbolic wild child, in whom language could be reunited with nature, society might reset itself to an essential innocence, a lack of artifice.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> History, in DeLillo's fiction succumbs to the gamesmanship of poststructuralist relativity in which competing narratives elide the truth of personal testimonies, a truth supposedly lost to the self-referential structure of language. The landscape of *Underworld*, is one which exists beyond the 'end of history', in a liminal space in which history returns in uncanny repetitions. I build on Berger's argument that in its figures of wild children, DeLillo's fiction represents a counter-linguistic turn towards unrepresentable materiality, but I demonstrate that this desire to reclaim history is not in fact, for DeLillo, a turn away from language. Language and material history are bound together in DeLillo's work, neither one erasing the other. Modernist and postmodernist impulses compete within his work as he exposes, critiques and resists the 'gamesmanship of fiction and prehistory'.

<sup>252</sup> Paul Maltby, 'The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo', *Contemporary Literature*, 37:2 (summer 1996) pp. 258-277, p. 261.

<sup>253</sup> This obsession with an innocent, pre-social or "feral" child can be traced to Rousseau's *Emile* and is recreated in Wordsworth's *Prelude* children. In France at the turn of the nineteenth century a child was found in the woods; he could not speak and it was assumed at the time that he had lived his entire life in the woods (we know now this would be totally inconceivable). The boy was subjected to intimate study in the hope that he might reveal knowledge of the relationship between man and animals, confirm the boundary between the two, or indeed testify to the nature of humanity. Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, influenced by the work of

For DeLillo, however, the inverse is true; culture and language has become blank and empty of meaning, and the figure of the wild child imbued with knowledge and symbolic significance. *Underworld's* epilogue begins with the assertion that 'Capital burns off the nuance of a culture' (U, p. 785), and it is in this scorched post-apocalyptic landscape of nuclear warfare and the global hegemony of capital that the wild child re-emerges in postmodern form as a possible image for cultural regeneration through his/her ability to navigate a post-apocalyptic wilderness of simulacra. This cultural regeneration is bound to the project of redeeming language; however, this version of redemption looks very different to the version imagined by the Romantics in which language might exist in transparent relation to nature, a relationship embodied in the figure of the wild child. What, then, does it mean to want to redeem language in DeLillo's postmodern landscapes?

I demonstrate that the version of writing or reading the child which develops in DeLillo's fiction does not expose an essentially human 'core' outside of language as Berger suggests; rather, the child embodies a deeply invested *linguistic* moment as she does in James's novels. DeLillo's child figures, nevertheless, exist in tension with a Jamesian version of literary subjectivity in which knowledge of a character's interiority is achieved through participation in the novel's style. In *Underworld*, the reader participates in the style of the novel to the extent that the only interpretative practice made available is a paranoid one which immediately embroils the reader in the novel's counter-histories of intertwined belief systems; the version of literary knowledge which develops as a result is a suspicion of the very concept of interiority and a denial of "innocent" forms of engagement with the literary subjectivities on offer.

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Rousseau, named the boy Victor and undertook to educate him; he recorded and published his studies of Victor in a paper entitled 'An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man' (1801).

Exploring social anxieties about reproduction and futurity, Naomi Morgenstern traces what she terms 'the posthuman wild child' in contemporary fiction. This wild child is characterised by its destructive tendencies, but unlike the Enlightenment wild child, this child 'often appears in a physical or ideological space in which the easy distinction between the wild and the civilized or rational has collapsed.' (*Wild Child: Intensive Parenting and Posthumanist Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) p. 2).

The child's knowledge, then, becomes something different in *Underworld*. If earlier novels, such as *Ratner's Star* (1976) and *The Names* (1982), mock the ways in which adults pursue childhood knowledge, and an adult desire for innocence (as a lack of knowledge, artifice or desire), then in *Underworld* the pursuit of childhood knowledge represents the tension between games emptied of historical or cultural specificity and child's play as something historical, dark and destructive. DeLillo's novels do not engage with a project of interpretative difficulty founded in representations of the child's mind in the same way that James's novels do; nor do they orchestrate a truth produced in stylistic relativity. Instead, the child is both the symbol and the real of material history made *visible*. The child does not represent a gap in the symbolic; rather, she becomes visible through the process by which history is written onto her body.

Language, then, and the child's language as an embodied voice or uninterpretable speech becomes a crucial part of DeLillo's project: his wish to produce an ethical fiction. In this DeLillo confronts the issues that James worked so hard to solve when representing children, issues of writerly identity, voice, representation and interpretation. DeLillo struggles to bring together the embodied voice of the child with the imperative, in *Underworld*, to write history onto the body of the child; the one continually erasing the other. This struggle presents a new way into understanding DeLillo's novels. His work tries hard not to endorse a messianic vision of the Romantic wild child, whether as a carrier of social meaning or as a signifier of structural outsidership. Instead, in *Underworld*, DeLillo tends to float hopeful potentialities through specific characters, who are pitted against one another without any one of them being endorsed. This slippery satirical technique, however, fails at points to distinguish itself from the narrative voice and as a result collapses into the melancholic sincerity which DeLillo tries so hard to pin point and not replicate. In these moments we see a critical voice in the novel dissolve and resemble, instead, Bowen's fear of the all-too-earnest

writer, raising the question again of whether the novel can produce both a critical voice and an ethical fiction in the way that DeLillo desires.

#### 4.1. 'Play-talk' and Paranoia

The value of play to the work of the writer, and the version of literary knowledge produced by the relationship between play and writing, is the central concern of one of DeLillo's most cryptic novels, *Ratner's Star* (1976). This novel establishes its structure through the rules and formulas of those games which correspond with the question posed by the novel: what happens to the play of language when it is channelled into game structures? Punctuating the narrative of *Ratner's Star* are snippets from the notes of DeLillo's fictional eminent psychologist Edna Lown:

- l. In no time at all we enter the cloud of modern thought. Here the limits of childhood involve the shattering of perspective. ...
- m. Growing, the child perceives a difference between itself and its class. The child's mother is no longer the sole teacher of "words." The erotic content of language begins to dissolve.
- n. "The "truth" about language is not available to us. Only play-talk, the lost form of knowledge, can express what is otherwise unspeakable. Is there a connection between these sentences?
- o. Play-talk is the natural mode of brute locution. It alone is free of disguise and ambiguity.
- p. What do we mean when we say that the function of a logically perfect language is to set severe limits? It's possible we have the thing backwards. ...
- s. The secret task of logic may be the rediscovery of play. (RS, pp. 331-332)

The reader is introduced to Edna during her work on the Ratner's Star project, where she is part of a team attempting to decode a phantom message from an untraceable source. Out of this emerges a scientific endeavour named "Logicon": a secret project aiming to engineer a pure, logical language of universally comprehensible symbols that would replace a culturally and historically specific lexicon, through which to communicate with other potential

intelligent life in the universe. The structural idealism on which this linguistic project is founded is mirrored in the characters' obsessive creation of games with rigid rules and boundaries, for example Softly's ball games (*RS*, p. 436). These fragments of Edna's personal notes, which she terms her 'subprofession', are reflections provoked by her work on Logicon. *Ratner's Star* is a satirical response to the debate between a scientific and a mystical approach to redeeming, not simply the communicative function of language, but the creative functions of speech: appropriating the world-remaking ability of discourse. Edna's notes, her raw and unedited insights, though clearly meant to be read with some degree of scepticism, appear in tension with the novel's satirical mode. They work as a cypher for understanding the novel's concerns regarding competing approaches to language, the discourse of mystical childhood babble and the discourse of serious scientific study, areas which are brought together in the novel through the continuation into adulthood of a compulsive desire to invent game structures.

In her notes, Edna acknowledges that when thinking about childhood, perception is coloured, or even obscured, by the conceptual mode of the period, by 'modern thought': thought shaped by the scientific and cultural models in favour at the time. Though this claim could be made about almost anything, childhood is singled out by DeLillo due to the novel's concerns regarding the engineering of game structures in the sciences as a way in which to control the chaos of modern experience by limiting the variability of linguistic structures, a concern demonstrated throughout in the way that adult characters attempt to capture the child's interaction with language through their games and turn to the child's pre-verbal sighs and screams for prophetic knowledge: 'a child is all, his sigh a knowing contemplation of time and place and all those darker energies that constitute his peril.' (*RS*, p. 97). Edna continues to remind herself of the necessity of 'shattering' the 'limits' that fix "childhood" to a set of qualities established by the perspective of any one period and by our own personal, valorised memories of childhood. Through Edna's notes DeLillo illustrates the paradoxical

desire to engineer rigid structures in response to an unruly poststructuralist unreality and then to orchestrate means of escaping these structures.

*Ratner's Star*, like much of DeLillo's other work, explores the ways in which hegemonic narratives surrounding childhood are employed in response to the desire to redeem language imagined as a Fall story, to rediscover the "real" through a universal, innocent language, a language removed from the possibility of lying. DeLillo's novels want to overcome the limits set around childhood – the situating of childhood as a fixed, ontologically stable developmental stage – to analyse what an *unlimited* understanding of childhood could offer to modes of knowing and interpretation. Though scientific, Edna's perspective is set in contrast to the false certainty provided by structural linguistics and, thus, leaves the conceptual space for a sort of mystical thinking around childhood, for the potential for what she terms 'play-talk' to be an instinctive, universal means of communication which might avoid the misunderstandings provoked by an ambiguous and arbitrary language. Childhood babble paradoxically becomes the solution to the fall of language in the story of the Tower of Babel. When they appear within the narrative, Edna's notes portray her privately indulgent, yet self-conscious, almost self-mocking, hope for a transparent sign; this self-effacing mode of exploration into the possibility of redeeming linguistic meaning – of reuniting the word with its referent in an empirical reality – seems to convey DeLillo's own ironic position regarding his desires for language. Play-talk, then, develops as a way of reaching a universal, transcendent meaning without the need for a transparent sign system enforced through a rigid, invariable, rule-based structure.

Emerging as a compromise formation, play-talk enters the pre-symbolic voice of the child into discourse to discover what these expressions might reveal about language more broadly with a view to decoding, what Edna understands to be, 'the final secrets of childhood':

t. The codes to language contained in play-talk are the final secrets of childhood.

- u. Is it silly to say that there is only one limit to language and that it is crossed, in the wrong direction, when the child is taught how to use words? ...
- w. Is play-talk a form of discourse about language? That the answer is in the affirmative seems undeniable.
- x. I'm tempted to say: babbling is a metalanguage. (RS, p. 365)

Though Edna uses a Romantic register, her notes scrutinise the Romantic conception of language as a corrupting influence on childhood. Through Edna's notes, then, DeLillo is clearly engaging with the literary history surrounding the relationship between the pre-social wild child and the desire for a transparent language. In so doing he makes his readers aware of the continuing influence of the Romantic child paradigm in contemporary discourse around childhood. Edna's notes illustrate DeLillo's attempt to consider play-talk, not as a way to reach a pre-symbolic unity before the fragmentation of the self in language – a transparent sign system through which the truth about reality can be reached – but as a 'metalanguage', a map of coded expressions which exists not as much beyond language as among it, a way of commenting upon the features, concepts and consequences of language.

Edna's notes suggest that play-talk might be the tool with which to unlock the secret unvoiced voices of an 'erotic' language of childhood, what DeLillo, in his essay 'The Power of History,' considers as the 'Eros of language' – language as a 'life-giving force', a discourse of whispers: the 'sensuous breath' of creation as opposed to the death-driven completion of stable meaning.<sup>254</sup> Play-talk is a discourse of accidental shifting signifiers which avoid lexical determinism through embodying an errant, unorganised slippage of desire into voice, removing the limits of identity through eliminating the syntactical rules binding the speaker to language. Stretching across the language and thematic content of many of DeLillo's novels, play-talk adopts multiple forms; an intimate network of erotic, breathy speech-acts, 'a sensuous breath', it is a contagious, temporally and spatially dislocated discourse, frustrating

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<sup>254</sup> Don DeLillo, 'The Power of History', *The New York Times* (September 7, 1997)  
<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>. Accessed: 27.03.2016.

interpretation and pushing against the limits of communication to express the 'otherwise unspeakable', a discourse which speaks to a critical aporia, outside of the 'gamesmanship of fiction and prehistory'.<sup>255</sup> History, Boxall argues, holds new ontic possibilities for DeLillo due to the failure of critique; a critical voice, he suggests, is not redeemed by art or language but by an ethical turn to history and materiality.<sup>256</sup> DeLillo wants play-talk to emerge out of this critical aporia as a discourse, a historical language, and a version of writing that might produce the conditions for the possibility of both a critical voice and an ethical fiction.

*Ratner's Star* is a novel preoccupied with the ways in which games and gamesmanship exist in tension with play-talk. In a notification of the winners of Nobel Prizes, received by the novel's protagonist Billy Twillig, the description of the work of the literature prize winner, Chester Greylag Dent, reads, for work on 'the philosophy of logic, the logic of games, the gamesmanship of fiction and prehistory' (RS, p. 306). Here, the narrative draws attention to the gamesmanship of the novel itself and to the reader's own position as a player embroiled in the novel's game structure. The term 'gamesmanship' originated in the Cold War period and is defined as 'the art of winning' by 'means that barely qualify as legitimate' and employing manipulative techniques to gain a psychological advantage and outwit one's opponents.<sup>257</sup> By adopting an explicit game structure which follows the structure of Carroll's Alice books, only to subtly expose 'the gamesmanship of fiction', the novel warns the reader against participating in a paranoid interpretative practice of gamesmanship; however, it refuses to produce the conditions for an alternative reading to emerge.

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<sup>255</sup> The desire for a stable interpretative methodology underlies the invention of games structures with rigid limits by many of DeLillo's characters. For DeLillo's characters the loss of the delimited order of childhood corresponds with the loss of the limits of the Cold War; they struggle to invent games which will return them to the interpretative methodologies that they imagine are made possible by the stable power relations of childhood. Too much space makes action impossible for DeLillo's characters; they demand order to act, without this they are overcome by the aporia of the void, creating games so as to restructure this empty space.

<sup>256</sup> Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>257</sup> "gamesmanship, n." *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2018) [www.oed.com/view/Entry/76488](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/76488). Accessed 22 May 2018.

*Ratner's Star* offers a history through which to read both *Underworld's* vast time span and its complex relationship with the period in which it was written. Following the horrors of two world wars social codes, virtual economies of morality and meaning, were left desolated across Europe and North America. The gamesmanship of the Cold War period, then, worked quickly to re-establish the old certainty of war-time binary models for identity. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, this oppositional identitarian politics slowly became irrelevant. Left with the Cold War structure although it is no longer as relevant, *Underworld* is about living with and through anachronistic antagonisms, outmoded structures of thought and feeling. Deleuze suggests that during this post-Cold War period the hegemony of global capitalism brought about the impossibility of definitive change in economic and social structure; he then outlines the process by which a system of global capital worked to erase historic, idiosyncratic social and cultural codes, myths or conceptual frameworks.<sup>258</sup> Mapping the underworld of these displaced and redefined cultural myths and conceptual frameworks is the central concern of many of DeLillo's novels which, in so doing, reveal the ways in which transformations of these myths linger on in discourse as an 'underhistory' of whispers (*U*, p. 791).

This divide between the gamesmanship of the Cold War and the limitless hegemony of capital in the post-Cold War period corresponds with Peter Knight's analysis of *Underworld* which contrasts the 'secure paranoia'<sup>259</sup> of the Cold War in which America's diverse citizens are united through the certainty of national identity, with what he identifies as a post-Kennedy assassination fluid paranoia: a system of 'shifting, subterranean beliefs'<sup>260</sup> in which boundaries between enemies and friends are blurred and identity becomes unclear. In this chapter, this system of subterranean beliefs in DeLillo's fiction is considered to be a post-

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<sup>258</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>259</sup> Peter Knight, 'Everything is Connected: *Underworld's* Secret History of Paranoia,' *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles (eds.) (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 2000) p. 291.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

Cold War paranoia: the result of both the Kennedy assassination and of the globalisation of capital. In *Underworld*, which sets out to chronicle the shifts in experiences of personal and national identity through the Cold War to the end of the twentieth century, the systems of paranoia shaping the novel's style adopt different game structures that both underpin, and on occasion undermine, the novel's complex structure. This post-Cold War paranoia takes the form of a game resembling *it* (or tag). Although it still adopts a clear structure, this game of subterranean beliefs has no end, no temporal or spatial limits; traditional methods for navigating the game structure, such as gamesmanship, no longer apply because opponents are continually shifting. The play-talk of DeLillo's novels, composed of intimate, conspiratorial whispers, emerges in representations of this period of fluid subterranean paranoia and is set in contrast to the secure paranoia of Cold War gamesmanship. These unvoiced voices are the traces of lost social codes which ripple through the surface of relations of capital, momentarily exposing the haunting discontent and disempowerment of desiring subjects in a late-capitalist system.

*Underworld* is structured, primarily, around two games which underpin American cultural identity: chess and baseball. Although allotted varying significance by different characters, the narrative economies of both chess and baseball emulate the dynamics of national and ideological conflicts in the form of competitive, organised, turn-based combat. The games shift from a dynamic, constitutive connection with the events of the Cold War sections, to a nostalgic, cult-like significance in the sections of the novel which explore the loss of stable models for identity in post-Cold War culture. *Underworld* avoids establishing a simplistic dialectic of "good play" and "bad play", "pure" or "impure" play; instead the novel represents the processes by which the different versions of play, encouraged by various game structures, undermine the constitutive claims made by the closed systems of the two central mythologised games, chess and baseball, on an increasingly fractious and unstable post-Cold War American identity. Whilst doing this the novel still encourages its readers to thoroughly

consider the ramifications of rigid game structures on the subjectivity of American citizens. The structural significance of chess and baseball in *Underworld* is continuously challenged by the many other versions of games and child's play represented in the novel, these include: *It* (considered at length by Bronzini in Part Six); the other games played in the 'play street', for example, hop-scotch, skipping, hand-ball; George the waiter's reminiscence of 'turn[ing] junk into games' (U, p. 663), which brings Klara's artwork (turning abandoned B-52 bombers into an art installation) into a dialectic of art as games; the representations of games in the Bruegel painting *Children's Games* (U, p. 673); the child filming who accidentally captures a murder by the Texas Highway Killer, this filming is described as 'just another game in which the child invents the rules as she goes along' (U, p. 157); the visceral image of children playing baring the horrific physical signs of radiation poisoning as a result of living in close proximity to nuclear test sites in Kazakhstan (U, p. 802); Cotter and Esmeralda's running; the 'pinwheels that never stop spinning' (U, p. 823); the image of outdoor child's play with which the novel ends (U, p. 827).

In a rare moment of assertion about good fictional practice in 'The Power of History', mentioned earlier, DeLillo proclaims that 'it is fiction's role to imagine deeply, to follow obscure urges into unreliable regions of experience – child-memored, existential and outside time.'<sup>261</sup> Recreating the tensions between historical and ahistorical experiences which are highlighted in its many representations of games, *Underworld* maps the flows of desire in periods of paradigm shifts: charting what happens when idiosyncratic human behaviours meet historical events which rupture discursive practices. *Underworld* follows this encounter into 'unreliable regions of experience' which cannot be pinned down to the power structures of a particular period and are not easily representable: games of 'obscure urges', such as *it*, which resist assimilation into a particular discursive practice, leaking intimations of

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<sup>261</sup> DeLillo, 'The Power of History'.

transcendental experience.<sup>262</sup> *Underworld*'s vast body of subterranean stems maps the routes of 'obscure urges' in pivotal historical periods through the complex intersections between characters, their desires and the games or ahistorical situations they engineer within which to enact them.

*Underworld* maps the human impulse, at all ages, to create games in an attempt to impose order on events; games provide contained situations with rigid limits through which individuals can forge a unified and invariable identity. The novel's rhizome structure of subterranean stems of obscure desire, reflecting the fluidity of post-Cold War paranoia, leaves its characters, and at points, its readers, nostalgically yearning for the certainties of the Cold War baseball game. The first baseball game in the novel marks the origin of the Cold War and following this, the novel's temporal sliding creates the conditions which provoke in the reader a desire for certainty of their position or identity; subjectivity, as in Bowen's novels, is not reliant upon interiority but emerges in interactions between characters and objects such as the baseball. In Part One of *Underworld*, the novel's protagonist, Nick Shay, meets artist Klara Sax at her desert art installation as she is being interviewed. She nostalgically contemplates the Cold War, recalling it as a time in which knowledge was fixable before the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc and accompanying destabilisation of power relations. Klara describes the 'complex sensation' of watching the lights in the night sky and imagining that she's seeing the light refracted off the 'ever-present' B-52 bombers:

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<sup>262</sup> '[C]hild-memored' experiences, such as *it*, that are not easily representable frustrate the interpretative practice of gamesmanship, and demand, for DeLillo, a language which can merge the transcendental and the historical. DeLillo's post-Cold War paranoia takes the form of a game such as *it*; though it mimics power relations, *it* has been played for centuries and represents a lingering on of unvoiced voices, joining the transcendent with the historical. DeLillo's use of *it* performs a similar function as T.S. Eliot's use of the nursery rhyme, 'London Bridge is falling down' in *The Waste Land*; divorced from its original historical context the rhyme persists as a transcendental childhood mantra.

Iona and Peter Opie provide a cultural history of *it* and other games of tag in *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, based on their observations of children playing. They did this research in order to prove that the children of the 1960s still knew how to play and had not become addicted to passive forms of amusement. In addition to the work of the Opies, *The Study of Games* by Elliot M. Avendon and Brian Sutton-Smith provides a breakdown of their own sociological study of *it* which explores power-relations and coercion in the game.

feeling a sense of awe, a child's sleepy feeling of mystery and danger and beauty. I think that is power. ... Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focussed, it was a tangible thing. ... And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. *You could measure hope and you could measure destruction.* (U, p. 75, emphasis added).

Klara suggests that, at its most meaningful, power provides citizens with a childlike faith which can imbue the lights in the night sky with the security of a higher order: she concludes that, in contrast, 'Things have no limits now'. Without the force of opposing ideologies (Capitalism and Communism) it is capital that no longer has limits. Deprived of limits meaning has become unstuck and the artist's marginal or oppositional identity defused. The aesthetic of the game structures of power: the 'mystery and danger and beauty' of rigid game structures through which form could be measured or judged, and through which a stable cultural aesthetic could be identified, is destabilised, fracturing cultural identity. The aesthetic dimension of game structures, which provided stable cultural identities through the order and symmetry of unification in mutually assured destruction, an instrument for measuring hope or destruction, peace or apocalypse, is lost to a murky, subterranean cultural diffusion.

Discussing *Ratner's Star* in his 1982 interview with Thomas LeClair, DeLillo elaborates this idea that games fulfil a secret, lingering childlike wish for rigid structure. DeLillo's novels become games in order to fully demonstrate this desire for the stability of limitations, showing how literature might be partaking in, or even exploiting, this desire for a frame, 'Our childlike trust in structural balance' (RS, p. 49). DeLillo locates his critical voice, which develops from this novel to *Underworld*, in the breakdown of this structural balance. In both their form and their content DeLillo's novels continually challenge the desire to create a pure form which might exist throughout time, divorced from history or discursive practice; a form not symptomatic of its historical or cultural milieu but reaching a timeless, methodical beauty, tapping into the enduring order of childhood games. DeLillo suggests that:

People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives. Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order and they even have an element of dignity about them. ... There are many games in *Ratner's Star* and the book is full adults acting like children, which is another reason why people play games, of course. ... Games provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect. Within sixty-minute limits or one-hundred-yard limits or the limits of a game board, we can look for *perfect moments* or *perfect structures*. In my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion.<sup>263</sup>

*Underworld*, like *Ratner's Star*, is a novel permeated by games, to the extent that structure itself is represented as a game, whether that is social and power structures or the structure of literary form: the game provides a 'frame' within which to generate order and consistency. *Underworld* engages with the game as a contained ahistorical situation within which continuity of meaning and thus stable identity become achievable through invariable power relations. Exposing the desires which underpin this ideal, *Underworld's* characters struggle to reinstate the boundaries of Cold War game structures in response to the subterranean paranoia of the novel's structure. The game structure of *Underworld*, established in the prologue as emerging through the unfolding of the dialectic of baseball and atomic warfare, is undermined as the novel progresses and its structure shows itself to be, not a game of simple certainties, but a game made specifically in *uncertainty* through the interweaving of paranoid gestures; the dialectic of baseball and atomic warfare, then, becomes increasingly anaemic when intertwined with the novel's system of subterranean beliefs. The game as a stable interpretative methodology developed in response to a longing, as Klara explains, to be able measure things by creating limits, is undermined by the novel's rhizome structure in which events stem unpredictably from the root dialectic of baseball and atomic warfare.

The chaotic post-apocalyptic landscapes of *Underworld* inspire the novel's characters to organise their own games: rule-bound, teleological structures with rigid limits through

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<sup>263</sup> Don DeLillo, 'An Interview with Don DeLillo' by Thomas LeClair, *Contemporary Literature*, 23:1 (1982) pp.19-31, p.22, emphasis added.

which an invariable system of meaning might be achieved. These game structures, however, often prove an insufficient means of transcending this chaotic environment as they are undermined by the free-wheeling games of the postmodern wild children who populate *Underworld's* post-apocalyptic landscapes. *Underworld's* epilogue, set in the 1990s (the novel's contemporary moment), contains two powerful images of wild children negotiating the novel's post-apocalyptic hyperreal, punctuating the fictional real with material suffering made fictional again: Esmeralda's rebirth (explained in detail later in this chapter) and the children living on a nuclear test site in Kazakhstan. When we are introduced to the children in Kazakhstan they are in a clinic for treating radiation poisoning and are wearing T-shirts which advertise a Gay and Lesbian Festival:

It is the dwarf girl who wears a T-shirt advertising a Gay and Lesbian Festival in Hamburg, Germany, bottom edge dragging on the floor. ... Viktor says this is the result of an importing ploy gone awry. A local businessman bought ten thousand T-shirts without knowing they were leftovers from a gay celebration in Europe. ...

But this is part of the same surreal, isn't it, that started on the forty-second floor of that Moscow tower. (*U*, p. 800).

These children are overburdened with signification; just as Esmeralda's rebirth into the orange juice advert transforms her into a symbol of defeating death which denies her horrifying reality, the children in Kazakhstan signify the damage of nuclear warfare whilst the T-shirts perform a similar function to the orange juice – transforming the children's suffering into a consumable image and a potential market. They are marked as queer and become queer, in Stockton's sense of the term, in that they are unable to grow up or forward but instead grow sideways. The lives of these children, lived in constant proximity to suffering and death, are assimilated by the immortality of capital; the image of the suffering child body is saturated with the language of a consumer culture to which these children are denied access. DeLillo's postmodern children, then, provide a powerful critique of the flows of capital; the waste that capital denies through assimilating it into its bloated structure, is

returned to the novel through the historical babble of lost children's voices: 'waste is the secret history, the underhistory' (*U*, p. 791). This scene shares the same 'sense of displacement and redefinition' (*U*, p. 786) as Nick's experience of the 'forty-second floor of that Moscow tower' containing a night-club at the top of an office tower peopled with Lenin look-alikes and armed guards: a slippery post-Cold War paranoia adopting Cold War forms.

*Underworld* illustrates how, as 'states disintegrate', a post-Cold War system of global capital replaces them with a delusive difference; a choice that purports to meet the demands of personal desires, not catering to 'cold war ideologies of massive uniformity' (*U*, p. 786), which in reality dresses dying children in Kazakhstan in uniforms expressing the festivities of the Western world. The novel demonstrates that the "free market" of the post-Cold War system of capital offers a fallacious freedom, still dependent on the 'rigid categories' and limits of a Cold War game structure. The child enters this world of uncanny doppelgangers, doubled by her symbolic weight; her subjectivity is then dispersed and fragmented, not unified in line with the Romantic child tradition. Explaining simulacra in a way that is useful for thinking about this landscape of commercialised history and politics Deleuze describes it as 'an informal chaos',<sup>264</sup> an anarchic virtual-actual; no longer an imitation tethered to the real as its representation or image, but an independent reality: a complete 'displacement and redefinition' (*U*, p. 786) of the real. Adult characters in DeLillo's novels wish to give form to this chaos of simulacra: they struggle to create games to control, limit and unify their experience of reality in response to this chaos. The postmodern wild children in his novels, however, function within these chaotic systems of simulacra, denying the totality of stable form – their bodies affirming numerous stories at once – ironically achieving transcendence through the chaos of simulacra not through the ahistorical limits of social game structures.

In another of DeLillo's death-driven, post-apocalyptic landscapes in *White Noise* (1984), Jack Gladney, the novel's protagonist, who believes he is dying from radiation

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<sup>264</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p. 348.

poisoning, turns to his child to redeem language: to return meaning to the world through an alternative relationship with the constitutive power of language. For Jack, the postmodern babble of children's whispers, comprised of the simulacra imbedded into their 'brain noise', is imbued with mystical meaning. Watching his child sleeping, he hears her murmur the words 'Toyota Celica':

It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? ... Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.

I depend on my children for that.<sup>265</sup>

'Supranational' and 'universally pronounceable' this whispered babble is another example of play-talk. In a shifting system of subterranean beliefs, access to the original object is no longer achievable. The novel's system of paranoia circles its object without ever reaching it; the object is replaced by the surreptitious 'furtive sameness' (*U*, p. 786) of childhood babble. Moments such as this in DeLillo's novels present a post-signification, postmodern version of the babble of children's voices: a postmodern Romantic child who signifies too much but turns it into playful babble. This signifying too much is co-extensive of the signifying too much of capital, of advertising. Play-talk is a compromise formation between the preverbal and language: childhood babble entered into a system of signification and communication. In play-talk words transcend social language games, eluding control and undermining their structural limitations through the play of the signifier.

Foregrounding interpretative difficulty, in contrast to the traditional Romantic child aesthetics of simplicity, the babble of DeLillo's postmodern child undermines the desire for

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<sup>265</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 2011) p. 180. All subsequent references will appear in text marked *WN*.

interpretative limits through which to measure things. Instead, play-talk suggests a mode of communication and interpretation born out of the miscommunication and misreading inherent to postmodern discourse. Play-talk is a transcendent language of simulacra which cannot provide a transparent relationship with the object world, but enters the speaker or reader into a hyperreal of signs in which the sign completely usurps the thing; words become things, they have a 'presence' of their own distinct from their referent: in this instance the words 'Toyota Celica' bear no relation to the car – the word within a hyperreal of simulacra is no longer an imitation of the real but a truth in its own right.<sup>266</sup> The distinction between the word and the referent dissolves; in a reversal of Romantic transparency the object is subsumed by the word, like James's toy-words the word becomes the object. The Romantic desire to unite the word and the thing, to bring truth to the word, is perversely realised in the hyperreal of play-talk as the postmodern object is lost to the transcendent word.

DeLillo continually shows how children are made to carry the burden of redeeming language; his work, nevertheless, struggles to extricate itself from the very thing it critiques. While James's novels demonstrate torturing the child by forcing her to read and be read, DeLillo's novels scrutinise the use of childhood for what it can offer to an adult's understanding of the world. Jack states that he depends on his children for these moments of transcendent meaning. DeLillo, then, exposes the ways in which his adult characters, representing dominant discourses, rely on an imagined child figure to create hope for change in socio-linguistic structure as a figure on which to pin fantasies for alternate ways of experiencing the world. This creates a tension in DeLillo's novels between representations of childhood suffering as the continuation of history, and the introduction into the meaninglessness of global hegemony of an ahistorical, Romantic, mystical child as a site of

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<sup>266</sup> Deleuze's portrayal of simulacra as anarchic explains that simulacra are difference itself – no longer a copy of the real, not determined by the internal resemblance of the game structure, due to the loss of the original real and the consequent lack of a 'prior identity'. A language of simulacra, therefore, avoids the lexical determinism of a self-referential system of meaning – being difference itself it exists as a non-binary language: the possibility for unassimilable change. (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 372-373).

symbolic meaning. Whether she is the symbol or the real, the child in DeLillo's novels cannot remove herself, as Edelman argues, from ideas of progressive history as heterofuturity.

Toys and games in *Underworld*, which point to a lost fullness of meaning are cognate with deeply invested moments about the power of language. Taught by Jesuit priests at a reform school, Nick is instructed to name the parts of his shoe; when, after listing some obvious component parts he fails to think of any more, he falls into the trap set by the priest: 'You didn't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names' (*U*, p. 540). Father Paulus asserts the importance of learning by rote: 'everyday things lie hidden. Because we don't know what they're called' (*U*, p. 541). DeLillo experiments with this idea that if language constitutes thought and determines reality, reality can be reconfigured through altering our relationship with words. Nick names the parts of his shoe as a way of mastering meaning and the waste of the world through a correct ordered use of language:

I wanted to look up words. I wanted to look up velleity and quotidian and memorize the fuckers for all time, spell them, learn them, pronounce them syllable by syllable – vocalize, phonate, utter the sounds, say the words for all they're worth.

This is the only way in the world you can escape the things that made you.  
(*U*, p. 543)

Father Paulus is a political voice in the novel, advising Nick not to sign the petition in support of Senator McCarthy without knowing why his is doing it. He wants Nick to understand that words have effects. This modernist message is, nevertheless, not fully grasped by Nick. Following this conversation with Father Paulus, Nick perceives the reorganisation of his relationship with language as the only way to escape his cultural, economic and familial conditioning; however, his method for reconfiguring this relationship is to learn words in isolation, seeking invariable meaning in each individual word. 'Language', writes DeLillo, 'can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an

unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate.<sup>267</sup> This ‘unconstraining otherness’ is an otherness that is not hemmed in by the boundaries of the game structure, not a mutually dependent, binary otherness structured in relation to its opposite; rather it gestures towards a ‘free veer’ into the unrepresentable whilst acting as a comment on what the writer can do with representation. The voices of childhood lost to history that are tied to this unrepresentable otherness are articulated through a transcendental language of childhood babble or play-talk which is represented in free-wheeling, non-representative child’s play.

Black and white binary games in the novel, such as baseball and chess, are set in contrast to richer kaleidoscopic childhood games, such as *it*, which reflect the subterranean system of play-talk. Unlike children’s play performances or games in which the child represents an adult role (mother with a doll for example), *it* cannot be marketed and sold back to the child; there is no object there to become a commodity. In the game *it*, the word spoken aligned with the material touch instantaneously creates the *thing*: in line with the word “it”, the transformative signifier of the game continually shifts and signifies too much. Play-talk, like *it*, collapses meaning into stylistic, syntactical or sonorous context; play-talk is a discourse of experimentation, in which the meaning of a signifier is secondary to how it is used. In the same way that *it* reflects the structure of post-Cold War paranoia in *Underworld*, play-talk is the language of this paranoia: whispers of subterranean beliefs which lie beneath the games of capital.

In *Ratner’s Star*, Edna’s notes highlight this distinction between the stable meaning set by the ‘severe limits’ of Cold War gamesmanship, and the diffusion of meaning, and thus of identity, in the play-talk of subterranean paranoia: ‘What do we mean when we say that the function of a logically perfect language is to set severe limits? It’s possible we have the thing backwards. ... The secret task of logic may be the rediscovery of play.’ (*RS*, p. 332).

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<sup>267</sup> DeLillo, ‘The Power of History’.

Play-talk, then, returns the idea of a logically perfect language to the shifter realms of play, instinct and impulse, while the characters in DeLillo's novels seek out teleological games with 'severe limits' in which meaning can be secured.<sup>268</sup> Play-talk exists in contrast to Nick's naming of parts of his shoe and suggests that a return to a stable, unshifting understanding of language is no longer feasible; that the redemption of language lies in play-talk – a discourse fit for the postmodern hyperreal of simulacra.

DeLillo continually returns to the question of whether the writer can instigate cultural regeneration through reconfiguring the interpretative practices of readers and in turn the readers' relationship with language; not through channelling language into games with 'severe limits', but by investing meaning in a language of childhood babble. James influences interpretation through the failures of games to maintain their limits when challenged by stylistic difficulty; he does not attempt to reimagine the child's language, but instead probes the moments when communication between adult and child breaks down. These contrasting approaches affect how we read novels by James or DeLillo in a number of ways. DeLillo's novels never allow the reader to develop a childlike reading; rather, from the paranoid perspective that his novels cultivate the reader accesses the child as at once a symbol and a historical entity.

The final chapter of *The Names*, a novel DeLillo considers to have played a pivotal role in his oeuvre, is authored by the novel's child-writer, Tap. The change in writer and narrator needs no introduction; in contrast to the ambiguity around Leopold's authorship of the past in Bowen's *The House in Paris*, in Tap's chapter the style shifts and it plunges into a proliferation of childlike misspellings. Tap's short story details the childhood experience of a character in *The Names* who grows up on a prairie (another of DeLillo's vast empty

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<sup>268</sup> An example of this is Klara's desire for the rigid limits of the secure paranoia of the Cold War: a system of measurement and relational, or self-referential meaning, created through stable power relations. The novel juxtaposes this with the imaginative play and kaleidoscopic games of the Bruegel painting *Children's Games* which so disturbs Klara.

landscapes) and finds himself forced to take part in an obscure religious ritual in which all the adults, including his parents, are speaking in tongues. Tap's story, then, articulates the traumatic experience of being unable to participate in, or even replicate, a language, and enters transcendent experiences into language through its reshaping.

Tap's father, the novel's narrator, receives Tap's manuscripts; fascinated by Tap's misspellings he explains: 'I found these mangled words exhilarating. He'd made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable'.<sup>269</sup> Tap makes words new again by returning them to their rudimentary functions. His use of words reminds his father that words are 'secret' like DeLillo's whispers of 'sensuous breath'. Tap's writing shows how words can be 'ancient' but at the same time 'reshapable'; part of their innate quality is that their meaning is not static but can be remade and adapted. Tap's amorphous, plastic language is juxtaposed against the novel's language cult which preoccupies the narrator throughout the novel; a cult built around an obsessive reaching for a cemented sign-system. In Tap's story, his father explains, a man who injures his leg uses the wood of a birch tree as a crutch, Tap calls this a 'burch cruch'; Tap's father considers this term in detail:

This term had a superseding rightness as it appeared on the page. It found the spoken poetry in those words, the rough form lost through usage. His other misreadings were wilder, freedom-seeking, and seemed to contain curious perceptions about the words themselves, second and deeper meanings, original meanings. (TN, p. 376).

The double meaning of 'original', here, in some ways captures the temporal paradox of the figure of the child in cultural fantasy: the child's connection with a nostalgic history which infuses a vision of a utopian future. Like the Toyota Celica moment in *White Noise*, Tap's father betrays the fantasy that the child's confidently misshapen language might yield a system of signs capable of representing the postmodern real, whilst at the same time restoring

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<sup>269</sup> Don DeLillo, *The Names* (London: Picador, 2011) p. 376. All subsequent references will appear in text marked TN.

words to their origins, their “authentic” meanings. Tap’s writing becomes play-talk as it locates the ‘*spoken* poetry’ in words; his use of words is directly related to their sounds as well as their semantic sense.<sup>270</sup> Whilst accessing the ‘second’ meanings of words and revealing the multiplicity of meaning, the oral quality of this childhood language lends words a sort of physicality – an association with the presumed authenticity of oral tradition. This sensuous, *physical* relationship with language also holds, for Tap’s father, a timeless, transcendental wisdom. For him, the intense physicality of language leads to intense transcendence; the direct ability of play-talk to become a thing in the world, to disturb reality, forges a relationship between words and transcendent, otherwise inconceivable, experience. Tap’s play-talk rediscovers ‘the rough form lost through usage’ – the raw, unadorned word linked to its meaning more directly than through discursive practices, restoring the power of the word lost through over-use which has dulled it of its poignancy and its world-remaking capacity.

Tap is one of many of DeLillo’s wild children; home-schooled in Greece by his archaeologist mother, he spends most of his time writing stories. Tap’s readings are described as ‘wilder, freedom-seeking’, defining his interpretative practice as one which foregrounds the resistance of limiting structures. The reader is encouraged to share in Tap’s unmoored and unrestricted mode of reading. This form of reading, then, is not the reading alongside style that develops in *What Maisie Knew*, and is a different mode of reading to that which develops in DeLillo’s other novels. There is a conspiratorial pattern in this novel but it is dense and not easily distinguishable from the novel’s obsession with finding a historical childhood vernacular that is not nonsense nor is it language.

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<sup>270</sup> In ‘Structure, Sign and Play’, Derrida proposes that it is in ‘the moment of the attempt-to-write’ that ‘meaning can overflow signification’. He suggests that it is ‘when that which is written is deceased as a sign-signal that it is born as language; for when it says what is, thereby referring only to itself, a sign without signification, a game or pure functioning.’ (*Writing and Difference*, p. 13). Sharing Derrida’s preoccupation with a pure reality of language, in *The Names* DeLillo is exploring that happens when language becomes a pure game as it is uttered or written by the wild child, a game which resembles Bowen’s non-purposive, non-representative toys.

Cowart claims that, due to his direct, authentic connection with language, Tap is able to access and reclaim its 'redemptive mystery'.<sup>271</sup> He asserts that as a result of this ability to play with language, to discover new meanings: 'Actuality remains malleable in Tap's hands'.<sup>272</sup> Nick only partially succeeds in reshaping himself through the correct use of language; his attempt to master language, which corresponds with the aims of the language cult in *The Names*, contrasts with Tap's amorphous play-talk which redeems the mysterious power of language. DeLillo's modernist impulse to reassert the importance of calling things by their names occurs in tension with this childhood language. Like Wordsworth's image of the child-revolutionary who continually desires more and better from his toys, Tap makes these demands of language. Restoring the creative functions of language, these remainders, whispers of childhood babble, become discourse – subterranean fictions, from 'substatic regions' (*WN*, p. 180) of the mind, which allude to a 'deeper truth', a 'lost form of knowledge' (*RS*, p. 331).

In an interview, Anthony DeCurtis asks DeLillo directly about his fascination with children; DeLillo explains that he wants to explore the cultural fantasy that the language of childhood, or childhood babble, holds a connection to a 'natural truth':

I think we feel, perhaps superstitiously, that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults. In *The Names* the father is transported by what he sees as a kind of deeper truth underlying the language his son uses in writing his stories. He sees misspellings and misused words as reflecting a kind of reality that he as an adult couldn't possibly grasp. And I think he relates this to the practice of speaking in tongues, which itself is what we might call an alternate reality. It's a fabricated language which seems to have a certain pattern to it. It isn't just gibberish. It isn't language, but it isn't gibberish either. And I think this is the way Axton felt about his own son's writing. And I think this is the way we feel about children in general. There is something they know but can't tell us. Or there is something they remember which we've forgotten.

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<sup>271</sup> David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003) p. 178.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

Glossolalia or speaking in tongues, you know, could be viewed as a higher form of infantile babbling. It's babbling which seems to mean something, and this is intriguing.<sup>273</sup>

This connection to a 'natural truth' is not the same essentialist, transparent relationship with the object world that the Romantic poets sought in a language of childhood. Rather, DeLillo seeks a 'natural truth' about language itself, about the way that language shapes reality, in the hope that this insight into language might provide access to a version of the real which exists beyond conceptualisation in language but is intimately bound to the experience of a changing historical and social context. Tap's language, a version of play-talk, is neither completely 'gibberish' nor completely 'language', but a compromise formation between the two. DeLillo attaches language to the structure of reality in this interview; he describes the fantasy that the child's relationship with language might affirm an 'alternate reality' and thus restore the possibility for social change and cultural regeneration. Play-talk is intimately bound to individual histories, to the 'something ... which we've forgotten', bringing the lost voices of childhood (those experiences that we, at one point, did not have the language to describe) into a system of signification. DeLillo is interested in those obscure experiences, 'child memoried, outside time', which cannot be represented in the symbolic order, knowledges that surpass conceptualisation but still seem to hold meaning. Childhood babble, then, becomes, for DeLillo, a transcendent language, able to represent those unvoiced voices of history. DeLillo's novels hope to harness this language of childhood in order to access 'lost form[s]' of historical and cultural knowledge (RS, p. 331).

DeLillo avoids structuring an aesthetic around the alterity of this transcendent postmodern wild child; instead, he wants to use the body of the child as a marker of history to produce an ethical fiction. Though his characters often indulge in this aesthetic project, he insists that his own view is not projected through the voices of his characters. Whilst he

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<sup>273</sup> Don DeLillo, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo", conducted by Anthony DeCurtis, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, Frank Lentricchia (ed.) (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) pp. 43-67, p. 64

is interested in how to redeem language and his representations of children are bound to this desire, his characters often represent dominant perspectives on various issues which the novels themselves come to undermine. The obsessive reoccurrences of childhood babble, appear to testify to DeLillo's sympathy with the views of his characters to an extent; nevertheless, his novels clearly reveal the paradigms shaping these fantasies in their attempts to portray the children's lives spent carrying the burden of signifying this Romantic language and in their mocking examples of writers who indulge in the fantasy of the writer-as-child.

Bill in DeLillo's novel *Mao II* (1992) is an example of the novelist trying to recapture the 'dangerous creativity' of childhood and failing. In an attempt to restore the revolutionary fervour of the novel – the novel's ability to be a dangerous form which might influence world views – and to return the writer to the role of "terrorist of the psyche", Bill recalls inventing his own baseball games as a child and tries to recover the imaginative capacity of childhood that he has lost:

"I've been trying to write toward that kind of innocence ever since. The pure game of making up. You sit there suspended in a perfect clarity of invention. There's no separation between you and the players and the room and the field. Everything is seamless and transparent. And it's completely spontaneous. It's the lost game of the self, without doubt or fear."<sup>274</sup>

Bill here asserts his Romantic notion of innocence as a mode of inspiration. Writing towards a vanishing innocence shares in the dangers of Bowen's querying innocence but is mocked here for its idealistic vision of the relationship between innocence and transparency. Bill continues to discuss how the revolutionary role of the novelist has been usurped by the "terrorist". In a Romantic move, Bill attempts to access what he calls the 'pure game of making up', to recapture something similar to what Bowen describes in her essay 'Children's Play' as the 'imagination-games' of childhood in order to transform them into novels. Bowen

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<sup>274</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992) p. 46. All subsequent references will appear in text marked *MII*.

attributes the creative genius of the Brontë sisters to the continuation of these imaginative games into adulthood: the channelling of these childhood games into the work of the novelist. Bill, similarly, strives to turn his language into some form of play-talk, attempting to reach the unification of subject and object that he perceives in the childhood game of ‘making up’.

The child, for Bill, is bound to a fantasy of unbridled creative freedom through which to resist and reorganise exhausted formal structures. His post-Cold War desire for ‘perfect structure’ corresponds with that of artist Klara in *Underworld*. He desires a game of ‘innocence’ which would restore meaning to language by transcending anachronistic social models, avoiding the gamesmanship of the Cold War whilst restoring the stability of the game structure of identity lost within a post-Cold War culture: the ‘lost game of the self, without doubt or fear.’ Bill’s vision of the ludic spontaneity of child’s play is a ‘pure game’: creation without following a rubric or a pre-determined design. He believes that through engineering a pure game the novel might be returned to meaning and the form might recover its influence. Bill turns to the pure game as a postmodern response to the fictionalisation of reality – fragmented, unknowable and unrepresentable; the game unifies reality and provides a fictional answer to a fictional world. Bill hopes that through becoming pure games his novels might rupture the game structures of social systems.<sup>275</sup> DeLillo, however, like James, shows this idealistic perfect game structure to be a ‘cruel delusion’;<sup>276</sup> Bill embarks on a journey to join freedom fighters in Beirut but dies an anonymous death en route before reaching his goal.

Considering the conflict inherent to the apparent formalism of desire in DeLillo’s novels – the way that desire always conforms to traditional forms – evinced in the nostalgic

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<sup>275</sup> Bill’s remarks about radical literature taking the form of a pure game correspond with Deleuze’s theory that literature and art should be transformed into a ‘pure game’ in order to resist capitalist game models, such as the economic model of success and failure. (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 59).

<sup>276</sup> DeLillo, ‘An interview with Don DeLillo’, p. 22.

longing, even of revolutionary artist Klara Sax, for the certainty of power relations that the Cold War offered, DeLillo's work poses the questions: is there still hope for cultural and economic change? If there is, what form will this hope take, and without the stability of the Cold War game, how could we measure it, how could we *know* it? Can the language games of a postmodern wild child, emerging from the rubble of history – the ruins of Cold War game structures – encourage hope for change in the way that the ahistorical Romantic child in the past provoked radical social change? Can art or literature, by creating a perfect structure, or by re-deploying an ideal wild child, restore meaning to culture or re-discover the power to encourage new modes of interpreting the world, and in so doing produce a version of literary knowledge which recognises hope?

#### 4.2. Whispers of Childhood

Tracing the disappearance of anachronistic models for cultural work and identity, *Underworld* is a novel preoccupied with waste in its many varying forms. Adopting a Benjaminian mode of discovery and exposure of lost stories, the novel unearths the waste material of historiography and culture. The game structures of the novel, for example baseball and chess, in contrast to childhood voices, attempt to contain this waste. The whisper is voice as waste, a transient and mercurial version of waste that echoes through all of DeLillo's novels; it is the displaced, distorted and distended voice, not swollen but stretched – not just a reminder but a remainder, temporally and spatially dislocated. These wasteful whispers, remainders that cannot be assimilated, are the excessive historical voices of childhood babble which work to undermine the game structure's claim to assimilation and containment. The conspiratorial whisper demonstrates how a paranoid reading practice, intended as a tool for demystification, is supported by, and survives through, a system of enchantment. A result of the post-Cold War subterranean system of beliefs, errant and discursively adrift, the whisper

frustrates this hermeneutic through incessantly pushing the limits of the game, shifting to press against the legality of gamesmanship necessary for this suspicious interpretative practice to function.

The prologue to *Underworld*, entitled 'The Triumph of Death', is set at the famous baseball game which takes place in 1951 during the Cuban Missile Crisis and reverberates throughout the novel as the characters attempt to trace the location of the lost ball. This prologue establishes the connections, unravelled throughout the novel, between game structures and nuclear proliferation: 'The game and its extensions. ... the game as rumor and conjecture and inner history. ... The game doesn't change the way you sleep or wash your face or chew your food. It changes nothing but your life.' (*U*, p. 32). The whisper is an extension of the game, an intimate 'inner history', simultaneously secret and rumour: the conspiratorial network of whispers which emerge from hidden or lost games are a form of 'conjecture', a call to play that marks the return of the possibility of both an ethical fiction and a critical voice in the face of apocalypse.

Following the prologue, *Underworld* begins in 1992 as a waste management executive, Nick, arrives in the desert at Klara's post-Cold War art project and meets the collection of 'nomads and runaways' that form her team of volunteers, among them: 'burnt-out hackers looking for the unwired world, they were people who heard the call, the whisper in the ear that sends you out the door and into some zone of exalted play.' (*U*, p. 65). These nomad groups are drawn to Klara's project, re-painting discarded B-52 bombers in a post-apocalyptic desert landscape. This wordless whisper is the call to play which haunts Nick and other 'nomad' characters throughout the book.

The hackers are a particularly novel group; inevitably chained to the digital or technological world, they are a radical underground minority group in society who invade the private virtual worlds of individuals and institutions to decode their secrets. Their very existence implies conspiracy; this appeals to Nick, who sympathises with their underworld

operations, their ‘unbelonging’ (*U*, p. 106), not solely due to his line of work but also as a result of his personal history. The whisper is the voice made incorporeal: existing neither fully inside nor outside the body – undermining the boundaries of the body, the whisper denies the limits of game structures. The whisper occurs when a void opens between action and meaningful experience, for example the distance between the virtual and the actual for the hackers, or similarly for Nick between his sense of conflicting leisure and work-based, past and future identities: ‘something whistles through this space, a sense of games and half-made selves’ (*U*, p. 103). Childhood becomes something ethereal, a secret personal rebellion; ‘a sense’ of potential other worlds, experiences and identities. This whisper, or here the whistle, is the expression of what remains of childhood subjectivity in the world of work, a ‘something’ which cannot be represented, a spillage of desire that resists assimilation into adult convention. Nick later finds that the whisper, although personal, is a commonly nurtured secret rebellion: ‘In the bronze tower a fellow executive cleared his throat and I heard something go by in the small hoarse noise, a secret lingering of childhood, the game he played inside his life.’ (*U*, p. 119). This intimate insight reveals the interior world of play hidden beneath the repressive practices necessitated by working life under capitalism. The whisper of childhood games can be heard in the ‘small hoarse noise’ of the executive clearing his throat: the rough surface of this small expression provides the friction onto which this sense of childhood games is attached as it glides past juxtaposed against the quiet restraint of office life.

The convulsive speech acts, acts of breath, or ‘breath-words’, small coughs, cries, sighs, whistles and whispers, which litter DeLillo’s novels, rupture discourse with the awkwardness of a lingering, neglected childhood fantasy that Bowen perceives in the non-artistic working life; they act as waste products or miasmas that stain stagnating work-based identities. This ‘awkwardness’ is, for Bowen, the remainder or husk of the ‘imagination-games’ of childhood; a continually returning convulsion of ungracefulness which lingers

beneath the surface of an adult life that has half-forgotten, but not completely abandoned, childhood fantasy. Bowen explains that, in contrast, the writer maintains these childhood fantasies, nurtures and expresses them.<sup>277</sup> This awkwardness, like the ‘unvoiced voice’ of DeLillo’s haunting whispers of childhood, repeatedly harks back to an earlier pre-social immersion in fantasy: unmediated imaginative access to the whims of desire through which to harness the freedom of multiple becomings, shifting potential identities. For Bowen, awkwardness is the enduring trace of a long dead self, *embodied* in both the whisper of play and the whisper of death – the call to play of childhood fantasy and, simultaneously, the traumatic return of past or passed identities. This is the awkwardness of subterranean paranoia felt by *Underworld*’s characters after the loss of the secure paranoia of the Cold War game of power relations and the binary identity formation it supported.

These obdurate, breathy whispers behave as perverse excess: uneconomic remainders not able to be converted into art as Bowen wishes of childhood fantasy. This is what interests DeLillo; not just the successful transformation of these whispers into art, but the way that their existence undermines a tidy economics of development or desire. In contrast to Bowen’s neat economic aesthetics, DeLillo’s “ethical fiction” makes art out of this awkwardness. The very fact of the existence of whispers as the unassimilable, unproductive residue of resistance, reveals a deep discomfort with the hegemony of global capitalism and in doing so undermines its claim to an unchangeable, impenetrable future. *Underworld* organises this obscure, disarticulated resistance into a dialectic; testament to an underworld of discontent at the heart of capitalist culture, this network of expressive, wordless whispers forms a counternarrative which diverts the linear direction of “progress” – charged and multivalent, whispers bend the novel’s direction of travel.

*Underworld* ends by joining the whisper of play and the whisper of death in a ‘whisper of reconciliation’ (*U*, p. 827). Longing for his ‘dumb-muscled and angry and real’ lost teenage

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<sup>277</sup> Bowen, ‘Children’s Play’, p. 144.

self, Nick wishes for ‘the breach of peace’ in his mundane adult life (*U*, p. 810). Interrupted by a website ‘miraculum’, the narrative suddenly switches from first to third person to trace Esmeralda’s story. The reader might at first assume that Nick is reading this information on the website, or indeed authoring this final section due to the reference to his paranoid obsessions in the line ‘add the digits and you get thirteen’; nevertheless, the reader quickly loses sight of Nick completely. The narrator addresses the reader directly as “you” and in so doing the reader is included in the end of the novel as she was at the beginning. Attempting to imagine the word ‘peace’ as a *thing* in the world (a final undermining of Nick’s narcissism) the reader is told that she turns away from the computer, ‘distracted’, to observe the ‘offscreen’ image of child’s play outside the window. This direct mode of address implicates the reader in DeLillo’s project of producing both a critical voice and an ethical fiction. By layering narrative voices, the author is further removed from the work; not himself involved in the final Romantic image of child’s play, the responsibility for reconciliation is laid, instead, before the reader.<sup>278</sup>

The reader, “you”, is then told that beholding the room anew, she realises ‘the thick lived tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and eaten’ (*U*, p. 827). Reading whispers becomes, then, a way of reconciling the bomb with the thingness of the reality of objects it has supposedly annihilated and reinvigorating the conflict, difference or argument of materiality. The narrative ends, nevertheless, by illustrating the precariousness of the hope generated through these whispers, stating that this ‘whisper of reconciliation’ can only make you ‘pensive’; any hope is always a precarious hope – a whisper of transcendence, a wisp or trace of difference. These hints produce a version of literary knowledge capable of locating this elusive hope in compromise. The critical voice that we find at the end of the novel, then, is not sexy or radical, but quietly desirous of its own restoration. In its appeal for

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<sup>278</sup> In work on *Underworld* in *The Possibility of Fiction*, Boxall discuss the interpellation of identity which occurs in this moment of address; the force of this moment transforms the reader into a subject through the loss of difference or cultural specificity in the hegemony of the American voice.

reconciliation the novel does not create the possibility for a reparative reading; instead, this reconciliation participates in the mysticism of the fluid paranoia of the novel and shares the compromise of play-talk between discourse and babble.

Framed by the baseball game, the novel progresses through attempts to finally catch the lost ball; this competition then merges with the chess games Nick remembers from childhood, the structure of the chessboard colouring the pages of the novel black or white. Moving through this hazy landscape of remembered games which cross the boundary of the novel's fiction to influence the novel formally, the reader attempts to stitch together the time frame of the novel in order to work towards an unknown act from Nick's past (the murder he commits). The novel, however, becomes a game in this way only to demonstrate the failure of this structure; games in DeLillo's novels always eventually neglect their promise to order chaos or provide victory over death. The whispers of subterranean beliefs made up of the babble of postmodern wild children's lost voices undermine the game, bending it back on itself as the novel contrasts the artist's appropriations of child's play with the actual used-up objects of childhood. Reverberating throughout the novel, these repetitive echoes of repressed waste disrupt the novel's teleological game and threaten its designs of perfect structure, returning this perfect structure to the rubble of progress, the everyday objects and activities of childhood.

#### 4.3. Timeless Play: Running and Games of "Tag"

The street games of the children in *Underworld* provide the novel's characters with hope for cultural regeneration through continuing ancient ritual and cultural folklore into post-apocalyptic landscapes. Wandering the streets of the Bronx in Part Six of *Underworld* set in the Autumn of 1951, chess enthusiast Albert Bronzini pauses to observe an area known as the 'play street' (*U*, p. 662): sectioned off within this busy urban environment to satisfy the

Romantic child's need for outdoor play. Bronzini fears that this play street is being squeezed out due to the spatial pressures created by the growing cosmopolitan city, and that the child, therefore, is under threat of displacement: 'With cars, more cars, with the status hunger, the hot horsepower, the silver smash of chrome, Bronzini saw that the pressure to free the streets of children would make even these designated areas extinct' (*U*, p. 662). This is a wild child whose wildness is not rural but is tied to the city environment; however, Bronzini's perspective highlights a Romantic fear that space for the urban wild child to partake in "natural" activities of free-play will be erased. Bronzini's language of conservation animalises the wild child, portraying the wild child as precious and under threat of extinction in her urban environment. The novel suggests that with this erosion of play space, childhood as a time of games and play will be devalued: an unavoidable consequence of a society whose developmental trajectory is increasingly defined by an ideology with a solely economic motivation. With this resurgence of Romantic concerns, the novel questions: is capital here a potential threat to the Romantic wild child, or is the Romantic wild child a potential threat to capital?<sup>279</sup>

Bronzini muses on the contrasts between baseball and the ludic, imaginative children's games that he observes in the 'play street'. He juxtaposes baseball – a game which, in the prologue to *Underworld*, forms a dialectic with atomic warfare which acts as a rubric for the novel's structure – with *it*, another game of "tag". Bronzini considers that:

Baseball's oh so simple. You tag a man, he's out. How different from being *it*. What special genius in the term, that curious part of childhood that sees through the rhymes and nonsense

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<sup>279</sup> In the early nineteenth century, German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel introduced the idea of the necessity of play in educating young children. Influenced by Rousseau, play, Froebel suggested, was not just essential to healthy physical development but also held educational significance. Joe Frost explains 'The plight of children in cities was recognized by Froebel. He believed that they were deprived of rich opportunities for physical, intellectual, and moral growth through play that were available to the children of the country'. (Joe L. Frost, 'Play Environments for Young Children in the USA 1800-1990', *Children's Environments Quarterly*, 6:4 (winter 1989) pp. 17-24, p. 18). Froebel's ideas were transferred to the U.S. and influenced the early twentieth-century Playground Movement, which established a number of playgrounds in cities such as New York to encourage free-play. By the 1960s playgrounds were considered to be urban oases of anti-capitalism, zones of the city which remained immune to traditional forms of commercialisation.

words, past the hidings and seekings and pretendings to something old and dank, some medieval awe, he thought, or earlier, even, that crawls beneath the midnight skin. (*U*, p. 678).

*It* is depicted by Bronzini as outside time, beyond history: a game of desire unbound from the ‘pretendings’ of identity that exists beyond the rigid and rigorously maintained order of games, such as baseball, which work to unify a cultural identity. This game of ‘special genius’, that seems to flow organically from ‘that curious part of childhood’ – the part that, for Bronzini, transcends social identity with a prophetic access to ‘see’ the ‘something old and dank’ – corresponds with Sigmund Freud’s ‘Id’ of the same name: a pre-social well-spring of unconditioned, unmediated desire, a desire presumed to exist outside of the “hide and seek” games of social structures. A game that has no natural ending, *it* has no final winner or loser, like Freud’s Id, it continues on with the endless desire to catch its object.

The ‘oh, so simple’ certainties of baseball in the novel, which unite diverse American citizens in the stable binary identity of Cold War ‘secure paranoia’, are set against a post-Cold War paranoia of subterranean beliefs, mirrored in the structure of *it* in which the boundaries marking the other continually shift. The stability of identity offered by the baseball game in the beginning of the book was, nevertheless, always an illusion; it was already rife with complications, for example two New York teams that both move away to different cities. In a system of subterranean beliefs this preconception of simplicity is disabused and baseball begins to lose its hold over identity; the novel then progresses through charting the journey of the lost baseball, which, following ‘the shot heard around the world’ in the novel’s prologue, becomes a cult-like artefact of a lost time, intimately linked to the desire for a mythologised stable identity.

Bronzini’s lengthy scrutiny of the game *it* considers how, in contrast to baseball, *it* destroys identities rather than producing and reinforcing them:

Beyond being neutered. You are nameless and bedevilled. *It*. The evil one whose name is too potent to be spoken. Or is the term just a cockney pronunciation of hit? When you tag someone you hit her. You're 'it' missy. Cockney or Scots or something. ...

A fearsome power in the term it makes you separate from the others. You flee the tag, the telling touch. But once you're *it*, name-shorn, neither boy nor girl, you're the one who must be feared. You're the dark power in the street. And you feel a kind of demonry, chasing the players, trying to put your skelly-bone hand on them to spread your taint, your curse. Speak the syllable slowly if you can. A whisper of death perhaps. (*U*, p. 677).

*It* is a game in which the identity of the enemy fluctuates and is often unclear; it is a game of becoming-*it*, in which, through entering the game, players are agreeing that they have the potential to become the enemy, the other. In contrast to baseball, in which team identities are fixed and the game concludes with a winning and losing team, *it* has no final winner; *it*, like the word "it", is a position which continually shifts and is passed from player to player. The game, *it*, is structured around the continual transference of otherness, initiated through a coupling of physical touch and the performative utterance "*you are it*" which collapses the space between the game and the personal identity of the player, mimicking the interpellation of identity in a closed structure, such as the "us versus them" of the Cold War baseball game. Bronzini observes how the children 'take the pockmarked world and turn a delicate inversion, making something brainy and rule-bound and smooth, and then spend the rest of their lives trying to repeat the process' (*U*, p. 664).<sup>280</sup> Through reflecting and repeating the interpellation of identity in their 'delicate inversion', the children playing *it* expose the workings of the Cold War game. Unconsciously illustrating the internecine nature of its binary premise by showing how any player can become the 'dark power', the game of *it* undermines from within the claim to an invariable, mythologised identity made by Cold War game structures and with that the identity-constituting power of socio-linguistic structures

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<sup>280</sup> DeLillo is preoccupied with deconstructing the human desire to engineer game structures. Here Bronzini touches on the way that in their desire for structure adults turn to children's games as a model for imposing order on a chaotic environment; this is also evident in Klara's yearning, in Part One of the novel, to return to the rule-bound structure of the Cold War game which she associates with the order of her childhood.

more generally. In so doing, *it*, ‘a whisper of death’, sets the force of interpellation against a real of unsymbolizable gaps, represented in the novel as a language of whispers. This language of whispers, or play-talk, is a version of language, as Edna notes in *Ratner’s Star*, that is ‘free of disguise’ (RS, p. 331), reaching towards experiences beyond ‘the hidings and seekings and pretendings’ of language which recall the boy of Windander’s mimetic, non-linguistic, hootings to the owls.

Erasing personal identity completely and undoing the binds of a group or social identity, a game such as *it*, which seems to transcend the instability of historical events, is sought by Bronzini as a game of existential truths and, thus, as a possible alternative to the binary identity provided through baseball. Beyond ‘the hidings and seekings and pretendings’ that the game itself requires, there lurks, for Bronzini, a reflection of essential human nature, the ‘medieval awe’ of Pieter Bruegel’s painting *Children’s Games* (1560). Bronzini’s preoccupation with the lost origin of the game contributes to his perception of its timelessness. The unchanging repetition of children’s games throughout history, frequently referenced in the novel, gestures towards an essential ahistorical child player. The priest, Paulus, addresses Bronzini’s concerns about the extinction of the playing child, through referencing *Children’s Games* (1560), in which many games still played in the twentieth century can be identified.



Figure 3: Pieter Bruegel, *Children’s Games*, 1560.

Paulus mentions this painting as evidence of childhood's uniquely ahistorical character, asserting that children 'side step time, as it were, and the ravages of progress' (*U*, p. 673). Paulus's Romantic juxtaposition of history and its 'ravages of progress' with the continuity of an essential child at play allays Bronzini's fears about the extinction of childhood, and undoes the linearity of history.<sup>281</sup> The novel, however, ironises Paulus's perspective and undermines Bronzini's Romantic ideas about the ahistorical ontology of *it* and its wild child players; subtly the novel returns the game to the historical context in which it is being played. While the novel represents toys and games as providing a potential locus of archaic meaning, this very hope is heavily ironised. In the novel's epilogue which follows this section, *it* or the 'whisper of death' – the disappearance of personal identity into an otherness required by social structure – is brought into conversation with nuclear waste and the radiation poisoning of the children playing in Kazakhstan through the repetition of the ominous phrase 'skelly-boned', now in relation to nuclear fallout: 'Whole populations potentially skelly-boned in the massive flash' (*U*, p. 826). The powerful image of children in Kazakhstan attempting to play follow the leader in spite of their physical impairments, diffuses the teleology of historical progression: 'Children played a game in the dirt, six boys and girls with missing arms, left arms in every case, knotted below the elbow. ... The kids are playing follow the leader. A boy falls down, gets up. They all fall down, get up' (*U*, p. 802). This game of mimicry directly reflects the power relations of the Cold War game in a post-Cold War, post-apocalyptic context. The narrative suggests that the children continue to repeat this game; the diffusion of teleology in this game of follow the leader symbolises the continued threat of the nuclear in a post-Cold War environment. By foregrounding the

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<sup>281</sup> The 'ravages of progress' correspond with Walter Benjamin's storm of progress discussed in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', written as an alternative to the historical materialist understanding of history as progressing towards an end point of ideal structure. Boxall's *The Possibility of Fiction* identifies this work by Benjamin as an essential intertext in *Underworld*. It is in this Benjaminian idea of history that the novel roots its preoccupation with the relationship between historical progression and childhood as an image of both futurity and timelessness. ('Theses on the Philosophy of History,' *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) pp. 253-265, Thesis IX, p. 257).

physical damage caused by nuclear proliferation, the novel demonstrates, in unforgiving detail, how the child does not in fact ‘side step time ... and the ravages of progress.’ In so doing, it illustrates that the ahistorical Romantic child is an idealistic paradigm which shapes the lives of children in a postmodern real when used to justify human rights abuses in developing countries.<sup>282</sup> The real dangers of Paulus’s assumptions that children will continue to play regardless of their environment are exposed here as his view is continually ironically realised by the novel.<sup>283</sup>

Not so different from baseball, then, children’s games throughout the novel cannot unbind themselves from their nuclear context. This relationship to the nuclear context reinforces the connection between the ‘demonry’ of the child’s play in *Children’s Games* and the play of the skeletons in *The Triumph of Death* referenced during the baseball game in the prologue to *Underworld*.<sup>284</sup> J. Edgar Hoover first sees the painting on the cover of *Life* magazine while watching the baseball game after being informed of the Soviet Union’s test of the atom bomb. This initial binding of baseball to nuclear warfare, then, anticipates the conspiratorial games of the novel. The novel’s dialectic of whispers of play and whispers of death is concretised in striking visual form by the two Bruegel paintings. The paintings become partner pieces, seemingly juxtaposed; their relationship within the text, united through the folding back of the narrative’s chronology, leads the reader to perceive the

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<sup>282</sup> I have used the term ‘developing countries’ as opposed to ‘global south’ because Kazakhstan is not considered to be part of the ‘global south’; nevertheless, neither term seems adequate to group together such a wide range of countries and both seem to group countries based on political agendas.

<sup>283</sup> Stockton addresses this divide between children in the U.S. and developing countries. She argues that the ‘ghostly gay child’, growing in delay due to not being able to publicly articulate their sexuality, which epitomised the delay characterising all childhoods in the twentieth century, no longer applies in the twenty-first century; instead, children in the U.S. are considered to be ‘growing up to soon’, asserting their sexuality in a number of ways which make adults uncomfortable. Stockton suggests that as children in the U.S. no longer desire the protection of adults, these adults have ‘outsourced’ innocence onto children in developing countries who appear to be, they think, desiring them or demanding protection. (‘The Queer Child Now and its Paradoxical Global Effects’, *GLQ*, 22:4 (2016) pp. 505-539. p. 506). DeLillo’s reference to the children in Kazakhstan perhaps unconsciously plays into this new paradigm identified and critiqued by Stockton.

<sup>284</sup> Bronzini discusses the painting *Children’s Games* with his wife Klara Sax who is unsettled by the chaos of the painting; she remarks that ‘it’s not that different from the other famous Bruegel, armies of death marching across the landscape. The children are fat, backward, a little sinister to me. It’s some kind of menace, some folly. *Kinderspielen*. They look like dwarves doing something awful.’ (*U*, p. 682)

paintings as interconnected: the chaotic scenes bleeding into each other. In this dialectic of whispers, *Underworld* establishes a tension between modes of discourse out of which a postmodern wild child is born; the Benjaminian discourse of the lost stories of history exists in competition with an ahistorical, Romantic or psychoanalytic discourse in which the child is pre-history and pre-symbolic. The games of the Romantic play street, of seemingly free-flowing and continuous desire, are returned to a Benjaminian definition of history by *Underworld's* post-signification postmodern wild child.<sup>285</sup> The wild children in the play street engaging in a game of *it* do not transcend the symbolic order but, all 'daemonry' and no purity, recreate it, repeating its deathly processes.<sup>286</sup>

Games in *Underworld* are a mechanism for restoring faith in structure, however, as DeLillo suggests in his interview with LeClair mentioned earlier, faith in the ability of the game to maintain its boundaries, to remain pure or perfect, is often misplaced. The myth of the contained ahistorical situation of the game is undermined as *Underworld* becomes a game without limits, to which history, or the disordered vastness of social context, is returned. Nick resists Klara's desolate postmodern real as the novel pits the voices of the waste management executive and the artist against each other; he then leaves Klara's art installation reviewing his own perspective of history defensively:

I lived responsibly in the real. I didn't accept this business of life as a fiction or whatever Klara Sax meant when she said that things had become unreal. History was not a matter of

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<sup>285</sup> Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' discusses the retrospective creation of history; he asserts that 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" ... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.' ('Theses', No. VI, p. 255). *Underworld* articulates history in this way; the entire text is made of these 'flashes' of 'unreliable regions of experience', memories of childhood in correspondence with 'moment[s] of danger', such as *it*, and the children playing in Kazakhstan. Whispers, then, are these flashes expressed in non-linguistic voice acts.

<sup>286</sup> Wilder and Esmeralda do not do this; instead, in different ways these two wild children define the margins of the symbolic order. The children in the play street, however, perform a version of play similar to Freud's grandson Ernst in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. According to Freud, Ernst is trying to control meaning (the mother) by playing a game which gives him power over a version of his mother (the spool); playing *it* mimics the deathly processes of the symbolic order in a similar way. Although Ernst joins play and death by using play to create a version of meaning which might master loss, this is not an example of a reparative impulse simply because it is using play to overcome his fear of powerlessness; Freud does not suggest that the child is working to make the mother loveable or indeed make himself loveable through this game. This example then exposes the differences in the impulses to repair, reconcile or master.

missing minutes on the tape. I did not stand helpless before it. I hewed to the texture of collected knowledge, took faith from the solid availing stuff of our experience. Even if we believe that history is a workwheel powered by human blood – read the speeches of Mussolini – at least we’ve known the thing together. A single narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation. (*U*, p. 82).

Nick and Klara desire the same historical cohesion and cultural consistency that a game structure can provide. Klara’s limitless post-Cold War unreality unsettles Nick; the voice of Klara in the novel illustrates the perspective of history’s narrative of progress through symbiotic opposition as having reached an ahistorical point of stasis, a limitless point beyond the end, ‘all conflict programmed out’ (*U*, p. 826). This debate corresponds with Francis Fukuyama’s contentious theory that history has come to an end, that, he insists, employs Marx’s Hegelian definition of history, understood ‘as a single, coherent, evolutionary process’<sup>287</sup> which progresses through dialectical conflict, to suggest that ‘liberal democracy’, or late capitalism, is the final ideal form of global human government. He argues that there can be no progression from this form to an alternative structure, and that the world has, therefore, entered a limitless period beyond the end. Denying the transcendence of children’s games through binding them to a post-apocalyptic nuclear context, and *simultaneously* illustrating the repetition of historic children’s games, the novel attempts to both return history to the game structure and refuse the historical linearity on which an “end of history” argument depends.

The rotations and repetitions of *Underworld’s* games: the tricycle wheels; games such as *it* with no temporal limits, winners or losers; the ‘pinwheels that never stop spinning’ (*U*, p. 823), mirror Nick’s reluctant admission that ‘history is a workwheel’. It is through these revolutions, repetitions and unstable connections that the novel resists the imposition of a coherent grand narrative and, with it, a stable hermeneutic or system of measurement, such

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<sup>287</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992) p. xii.

as that desired by both Klara and Nick, and demanded by the secure paranoia of Cold War game structures. The novel proves Nick wrong; history is not ‘a single narrative sweep’. Nick does not progress but lives through repetitions of the past and continual unconscious returns to his father’s disappearance. Instead of history progressing towards a final perfect structure, the novel engages with a Benjaminian definition of history, one in which, despite Nick’s protestations, history *is* ‘the missing minutes on the tape.’ In *Underworld*, history persists *only* in ‘ten thousand wisps of disinformation’ – the ‘wisps’ or whispers of subterranean beliefs, ingrained in the obscurity of childhood memories. *Underworld* is not, therefore, a novel of Fukuyama’s “end of history”, it is instead a map of uncertain subterranean beliefs which diffuse the stable teleology inherent to the definition of history on which Fukuyama’s theory depends. This theory rests on the idea of capital as the endpoint, and the novel appears to be playing with that possibility. In doing this, the novel shows the culmination point of history in pure immovable structure to be a delusion through its depiction of those ‘missing minutes’, singular underworlds of suffering, most notably that of *Underworld*’s postmodern wild child, Esmeralda.<sup>288</sup>

Performing to a large audience recalled in a section dated October 29th, 1962, Lenny Bruce calls out “‘We were minutes from being fireballed. But now, but now, but now. ... *We’re not gonna die!*’” (U, 624). New material arises from this moment beyond the end, material which emerges from the question, what happens when, in fact, you do not die? Lenny answers this question with a story of a girl which resembles the description of Esmeralda later in the novel. This girl is “‘An illiterate sad-eyed virgin [who] lives in a whorehouse in a slum district of San Juan’”, who can blow smoke rings out of her vagina and charges people

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<sup>288</sup> This argument in *Underworld* corresponds with Jacques Derrida’s response to Fukuyama in his book *Spectres of Marx*; similarly influenced by Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’; in which Derrida states ‘Instead of singing the advent of the idea of liberal democracy and the capitalist market in the euphoria of the “end of history” ... let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, *made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering*: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth.’ (Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 106, emphasis added).

to watch her perform. “Some people”, he continues, “interpret the girl’s gift in a religious manner. They think it’s an omen, a sign from heaven that the world is about to end. God has selected a poor illiterate undernourished orphan girl to convey a profound message to the world.” (U, 630). He spins a long story about this girl meeting a man who saves her from this destitute life before disassembling the whole story and replacing it with a new one about the life of the ‘real’ girl, much to the discomfort of the audience: “Let’s make her human. She’s real like us. ... The girl’s hiding in empty lots, down the maze of back alleys, because her mother’s gone again and she thinks the landlord will have her arrested. Let’s make her human. Let’s give her a name.” (U, 632-633). Lenny, however, never does give her a name. The girl remains another anonymous lost voice; in this moment she is both the symbol and the real, a testament to where children are placed in history. What is left, then, when you do not die, the narrative suggests, is the wild child.

DeLillo avoids the teleology inherent to the idea of a game or perfect structure, returning games to a version of history as ‘sites of suffering’<sup>289</sup> and ‘moment[s] of danger’<sup>290</sup> through his images of postmodern children. Homeless and impoverished, glimpsed foraging in rubbish before her violent death, Esmeralda is described as ‘a shadow on the rubble walls of demolished structures’ (U, p. 810).<sup>291</sup> In life Esmeralda never benefitted from stable power relations, she was never able to participate in a unified national or social identity. Esmeralda’s life was lived running along the margins of the game, signifying its limits – her shadowy figure only ever ‘glimpse[d]’, never fully *seen*. The game aesthetics in which hope could be measured relied upon Esmeralda figuratively, demanding her shadow to signify the margin. The nuns, Sister Edgar and Sister Gracie long to capture and ‘examine’ Esmeralda (U, p. 810). Nursing

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>290</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theses’, No. VI, p. 255.

<sup>291</sup> In his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin employs the Klee painting *Angelus Novus* to create an image of historical progression. He asserts that the angel of history is caught in a storm which ‘propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.’ (‘Theses’, No. IX, p. 257). Represented after her death as an angel, and in life running through the wreckage of the structures of the past, Esmeralda is caught in the chaos of ‘what we call progress’; her image at the close of the novel denies ideas of historical progression towards ideal structure.

Ismael, a modern reinvention of a Dickensian Fagin character, a sort of guardian of wild children, Sister Gracie glances out the window

hoping to glimpse the elusive girl. Sister has seen her a number of times from this window, almost always running. Run is what she does. It is her beauty and her safety both, her melodious hope, a thing of special merit, a cleansing, the fleet leaf-fall of something godly blowing through the world. (*U*, p. 813).

Imbued with the language of Romantic mysticism, the nuns perceive Esmeralda as existent outside of capital; for them, through her wild pre-social position she purifies a corrupt world. To stop running would mean death; Esmeralda's continued running provides a 'melodious hope' – a possibility for change or transition. The beginning and end of *Underworld* meet, not only in images of nuclear warfare, but also in images of the 'half-seen' running children which exist on the margins of society, their lives bound intimately to this post-apocalyptic nuclear context. The running of these postmodern children brings the novel full-circle, defying the end point demanded by its formal limitations. The prologue to *Underworld* begins with Cotter running to the famous baseball game which reverberates throughout the rest of the novel; when he is running he

seems to lose his ... unbelonging and all the stammering things that seal his adolescence. He is just a running boy, a half-seen figure from the streets, but the way running reveals some clue to being, the way the runner bares himself to consciousness, this is how the dark-skinned kid seems to open to the world, how the bloodrush of a dozen strides brings him into eloquence. (*U*, p. 13).

During the baseball game racial and class divisions appear to dissolve; Cotter is assimilated into an "us versus them" binary, representative of the illusion of a unified Cold War American identity. As soon as the game ends, however, racial and class divisions are reinstated. The belonging Cotter experiences during the baseball game is contained and ahistorical, it can only exist within the artificial limits of the game; in contrast, running brings him into a version of self-belonging not defined in opposition to an other. Running then

resembles Bill's 'lost game of the self, without doubt or fear' (*MII*, p. 46) but unstructured, it reaches towards a self undetermined by the game. Cotter is one of DeLillo's many 'linguistically impaired' postmodern wild children;<sup>292</sup> within the symbolic order Cotter finds himself 'stammering', however, silently running he discovers the fluency of a discourse of the body in motion, becoming just a body in transit which 'brings him into eloquence.' This language of the running body removes the limits of identity by refusing the subjects positioning in language. Pushing against the limits of the symbolic order, the unvoiced language of running is intimately joined to experience and as such is characterised here as capable of representing that which lies beyond conceptualisation in language.

Play-talk, a compromise formation between pre-verbal babble and language, is the bringing into eloquence of the linguistically impaired postmodern wild child. Running, then, acts in the same way as play-talk – 'the natural mode of brute locution' (*RS*, p. 331) – returning language to the body by transforming stuttering, babbling or whispering into language. The unvoiced language of the running body pushes against the limits of language; never fully beyond the symbolic order, it joins the transcendent with the intense physicality of history, this history is the history of bodies as waste (Esmeralda, the kids in Kazakhstan). Though for the nuns Esmeralda's running serves a cultural, aesthetic and even ascetic purpose, for Esmeralda running is about survival. Running for *Underworld*'s wild children is a compromise between the Romantic and the post-signification lost voices of a collective history that brings these wild children 'into eloquence'. Esmeralda's and Cotter's running exists in contrast to the running of baseball or *it* in which running is part of a structure with an immediate aim. At a conference in Paris (2016) in response to a question about the mystical quality of Wilder's tricycle ride across the highway at the close of *White Noise*, DeLillo simply replied that, growing up in the Bronx, "there were no bicycles or tricycles in my

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<sup>292</sup> Berger's work on DeLillo's wild children identifies them as 'linguistically impaired', though he does not discuss the children in *Underworld*, focusing instead on *White Noise*.

childhood, we just ran everywhere”.<sup>293</sup> DeLillo juxtaposes the tricycle and running entering them into relations of capital. Running suggests either fear or overwhelming physical pleasure; it implies an authentic experience of the city, freedom and mobility, which might otherwise be associated with the bicycle, a vehicle exposed here for its commercialisation when placed next to the tricycle (a toy which symbolises future mobility but actually enables very little freedom for the child).

DeLillo’s postmodern child exposes the ‘cruel delusion’ that the game model might provide ‘perfect structures’ through illustrating that the paradoxical desire to escape from structure but also to maintain it is always re-inscribed on the figurative body of the child. *Underworld* engages with the multiple ways in which people create game structures in order to imagine escaping them, recreating the Romantic desire to use the wild child to escape socio-linguistic structures. Demonstrating the interrelation between the wild child and game structures, the novel tests whether a pure game, a perfect structure, might be able to reinstate the revolutionary potential of fiction. The historicity of Esmeralda’s life, its poverty and destitution, means that her running is outside a game of *it*, however, following her death an image of her face reappears in a nearby orange juice advert and she is finally ‘tagged’: she becomes *it* – *seemingly* outside time as a continuous symbolic part of a game of mystical subterranean beliefs. After her death an image of Esmeralda as an angel joins those of the other dead children on the Wall; like the ‘shifter’ word “it”,<sup>294</sup> Esmeralda is not the first child and will not be the last (*U*, p. 816).<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Don DeLillo, Introduction to the Conference *Don DeLillo: “Fiction Rescues History”*, Paris Diderot University, France (February 18-20, 2016).

<sup>294</sup> In his essay ‘The Nature of Pronouns’ originally written for Roman Jakobson, Emile Benveniste discusses this function of pronouns such as “I” and “you” which cannot be understood without reference to context and refer solely to a “reality of discourse”. Influenced by Benveniste’s theories as proposed in this essay and by the work of Otto Jespersen, Jakobson developed the idea of ‘shifter’ words such as “it”. (Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971) pp. 217-223)

<sup>295</sup> Although *it* is discussed in detail in the Cold War sections of the novel, it comes to represent the game system of post-Cold War paranoia; it still retains some sort of structure but its boundaries are not temporally or spatially fixed. An end of history argument demands teleological limits which can then be transcended,

There is some collapsing of structures of Catholicism and anticapitalism here as the collective subterranean belief in Esmeralda's rebirth paints her as a martyr invested with the possibility for revolution: people share her story and an ever-expanding community forms around her image, spilling out onto the highway and clogging the physical infrastructure through which people and goods flow in and out of the city. The location of her image in the orange juice advert, however, conflates Esmeralda's rebirth with capitalism: her suffering is over now that she is with God, with capital. An outsider, unwanted and abused in life, in death she has been assimilated: even as myth Esmeralda cannot escape history and discursive practice. Through Esmeralda's story the novel shows how history and discursive practice always return to fiction. Although the novel tries hard not to posit a desire existent completely outside of structures of power, there is also no discrete, ahistorical perfect structure: pure structure cannot maintain its boundaries, cannot exist outside of history, therefore, cannot completely delimit change – it is here, in structural *im*perfections, that *Underworld* locates a precarious hope for change.

The story of Esmeralda's life and death 'stir[s] the hope that grows when things surpass their limits' (*U*, p. 818). Hope emerges, taking on a life of its own, when the limits of the game are breached; the structure fails to contain the waste it creates – this waste, a language of whispers and childhood babble which frustrates interpretation, is both transcendental and historical. Hope, then, can only flourish in instability or uncertainty: there is no hope in perfect structure. In line with the Romantic tradition of wild children (for example, Wordsworth's boy of Winander and the death-ridden girl children of his shorter poems), Esmeralda, in death, comes to represent a potential danger to established organisations of power or flows of capital; clogging up infrastructure and disrupting the symbolism of adverts, she goes from signifying the margin of the game to being entered into

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forging into the limitless hegemony of a "beyond". This game model of history is resisted by postmodern wild children who deny a history of limits.

it, forever portentous of its failure and the fragility of its boundaries. Nevertheless, Esmeralda remains a shadow on structures of power. The possibility of revolution brewing in the fiction of her rebirth is quickly dispelled but lingers on as myth in ‘unreliable regions of experience’, those impure fictions of subterranean beliefs. Through Esmeralda’s story of rebirth and assimilation, the novel seems to recall Benjamin’s passionate statement that ‘only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.’<sup>296</sup>

#### 4.4. Plotting Without Destination and ‘Pinwheels that Never Stop Spinning’

Discussing history as a narrative plot which moves ‘deathward’ with a colleague, founder of ‘Hitler Studies’ Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise* mentioned earlier, argues that:

All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot. (*WN*, p. 30).

This taxonomy of plots brings children’s games into an equivalence of sorts with adult plots and with the work of the writer: the creation of order through narrative. The stable teleology of the plot, however, is disproved by the novel’s insecure paranoia of subterranean beliefs; the destination of *White Noise* is scattered by the image of the tricycle, ending with Wilder’s impossible feat of survival as he tricycles across the highway. Plots are not necessarily perfect structures leading to a form of completion or climax through the writer’s intentional design; in DeLillo’s novels plots correspond more closely with the conspiratorial network of whispers. Rather than heralding the coming of perfect structure, these whispers of death echo throughout perfect structures or death-driven histories; a lingering on of subterranean

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<sup>296</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theses’, No. VI, p. 255.

fictions, whispers expose the imperfections in “perfect” structures as the continuing transcendent history of unvoiced voices. The babble of children’s voices, represented as a language of breathy speech acts, disrupts the relationship between plot and destination.

Representations of children’s games and toys, which point to a lost fullness of meaning in relation to the babble of children’s voices, upset the death-driven equilibrium of the plot. Studying the perfect coordinated symmetry of the ‘secretion patterns of red ants’ in *Ratner’s Star*, a scientist explains the relationship between ‘structural balance’ and death. He uses this study to explicate the human fascination with symmetry and perfect structure, stating

there’s always the view that an ultimate symmetry is to be avoided rather than sought, the reason being that this structural balance represents not victory over chaos and death but death itself or what follows upon death. A logarithmic spiral. (*RS*, p. 50).

The perfect structure is autotelic: complete in itself like the logarithmic spiral. In DeLillo’s postmodern landscapes language structures can be represented in the form of this logarithmic spiral; a closed system of rules, in which actions or words have meaning within the limits of the game: an inward folding, self-referential organisation of fractals closed off from the world. DeLillo’s characters turn to the predictable, measurable, aesthetic order of the ‘structural balance’ of games in an attempt to master ‘chaos and death’ through subduing language and meaning. Divorced from a transparent relationship with the object world, a self-referential system of language generates meaning in relation to itself: as part of a network of meaning, a word means in relation to what it is not. The ‘structural balance’ of this binary system of language relates to the ‘severe limits’ of the internecine Cold War game structure: “us” versus “them”; mutually assured meaning and mutually assured destruction.

In both his novels and his essays DeLillo continually suggests that through a renewed relationship with language, history can be reconfigured; he states: “There is pleasure to be found, the writer’s, the reader’s, in a version of the past that escapes the coils of established

history and biography and that finds a language, scented, dripping, detailed'.<sup>297</sup> Veering toward the language of aestheticism, this language which might free the voices of history from inward coiling games is DeLillo's play-talk composed of childhood whispers; in contrast to the structural balance of the game and its death-driven language of plots, language as this 'sensuous breath' is life-giving. Play-talk is a transcendent language in which words have no authentic prior identity and exist as pure difference, generating meaning in isolation not in relation to their opposite; a language adopting the 'informal chaos' of simulacra, diffusing lexical determinism and the accompanying sense of destination. Nevertheless, DeLillo's novels force this position to exist next to his determined modernism; for example, he has sympathy for Father Paulus's position on words, and ends *Underworld* with his own version of *The Waste Land*'s 'Shantih, Shantih, Shantih'.

DeLillo's 'coils' of history reflect the game structure of winning and losing present in Benjamin's ominous assertion that 'even the dead are not safe from the enemy if he wins'. A language of 'sensuous breath', the haunting voices of history within childhood babble, disrupts the death-driven game of the plot, 'the contract that all must sign', exposing the perfect structure as 'death itself or what follows upon death'. In *White Noise* the ironic image of Wilder's reckless tricycling further illustrates the ways in which DeLillo's characters turn to games or toys to augment or order their relationship with reality: to secure victory over death. The image of the tricycle marks the end of the novel: 'This was the day Wilder got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end street and pedalled noisily to the dead end' (*WN*, p. 370). Wilder refuses to acknowledge dead-ends, instead he changes direction in search of a more daring destination. Turning around he heads towards the highway, beginning a journey of epic proportions: 'The plastic wheels rumbled and screeched' as he 'began to pedal across the highway, mystically charged ...

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<sup>297</sup> DeLillo, 'The Power of History'.

The drivers could not quite comprehend. In their knotted posture, belted in, they knew this picture did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway, the broad-ribbed modernist stream. In speed there was sense. In signs, in patterns, in split-second lives. What did it mean, this little rotary blur? Some force in the world had gone awry. ... He was pumped up, chesty, his arms appearing to move as rapidly as his legs, the round head wagging in a jig of lame-brained determinism. (*WN*, p. 371).

This haunting, poignant image manages to be nail-biting whilst simultaneously sharing the same comic irony as Bowen's image of Eva as a 'reckless tricyclist'. DeLillo's distinctive obsessive patterns, referenced in the content of the paragraph, infiltrate the poetic architecture of his sentence structure: the two elongated sentences littered with commas follow a similar pattern through positioning commas in corresponding spaces, building intensity to the almost indigestible final clause. At points DeLillo's own syntax adopts the multivalent waywardness of the play-talk his novels describe; the signifier and what it signifies are interwoven in newly complex ways. The shape and position of words in relation to the grammatical markers controlling their sense is multi-sensual. The correlation of visual, oral and semantic sense has been delicately considered: the 'knotted posture' of the drivers is reflected in the convoluted, interweaving sentence structure – the words 'belted in' themselves constrained on either side by commas. These partnered sentences are separated by a series of contrastingly short, potent sentences; in this way the passage builds intensity by creating a rapid and unstable cadence, reinforcing the 'rumbling' precariousness of the plastic tricycle and the veering emergency-stops of the drivers. Writing poetically or symbolically may not always be about redeeming language, but here it works in line with a Romantic vision which seeks to join words to sense in a way that enhances their relationship with the "real" they describe. This self-conscious attempt to redeem language by harnessing the visual and rhythmic dimension of syntax recreates stylistically the modernism represented by the stream of the highway. This stylistic technique, then, emphasises the tension between the desire to redeem language and the image of the postmodern wild child that cuts through

the modernist highway as an unassimilable rupture: an extra-linguistic, dangerous postmodern real.

As with Esmeralda in *Underworld*, the image of the child in danger is again reversed here with Wilder to prompt the question: how dangerous is the child? The text indirectly asks its readers to consider the significance of the tricycle as the narrative flows into the consciousness of the startled drivers who question 'What did it mean'. As they seek meaning in an act motivated only by 'lame-brained determinism', the novel mocks the drivers' desire to imbue the toy and child player with mystical meaning and ridicules their belief that everything must hold meaning within the stream of the highway. In this context, the inscrutable postmodern wild child becomes a powerful marker of that which cannot be conceptualised within pre-existing narrative forms. The speed and danger of the road necessitates compliance to a common narrative, a pattern, knowledge of which is an essential prerequisite to using the road, in which signs have distinct life or death meaning. For the drivers, the 'rotary blur' acts as a rupture in the concrete, shared communication of the highway and diffuses its pre-determined destination. The child's transgressive play is here an anomaly that cannot be assimilated into the signs and sense of the modernist highway; it undermines the self-sufficiency of this structure and exposes its dependence upon the compliance of its users. Wilder (a wild child by name) is unaware of the rules; the rotations of his solipsistic 'furiou[s] pedalling' disrupt these established patterns, suggesting new modes of knowing or unknowing that take the form of an estrangement or gap. Clogging the flow of the modernist stream, the narrative does not attempt to give voice to Wilder's thoughts; in the place of a stream of consciousness, the image of Wilder's reckless tricycling embodies unrepresentable or unknowable motivation, ludicrous 'transcendent obliviousness'.<sup>298</sup>

Wilder's subversive tricycling destabilises the structural balance of the highway and in doing so disrupts established modes of interpretation. The tricycle is an ironic imitation

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<sup>298</sup> Berger, 'Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children', p. 352.

of the balance and ‘ultimate symmetry’ of the bicycle; the structural elegance of the bicycle, its two wheels working in tandem operates like the binary structures bringing meaning to language through oppositions between words. The third wheel of the tricycle, however, undermines the certainty of the binaries which structure language; for both Bowen and DeLillo the tricycle is a symbol of asymmetric excess. In *White Noise*, the chaos of the tricycle defeats death, overloading the binary symmetry of language which leads to complete meaning, to finality and destination. Tap’s ‘freedom-seeking’ language and interpretative practice, operates like Wilder’s tricycling: a ‘free veer’ of non-binary play-talk, frustrating the predictability and consequent inertia of a modernist sense of the relationship between language and interiority through the play of the signifier. This asymmetrical image of artificial structural balance ironically enables Wilder, who embraces the chaos of the tricycle, to defeat the immanent death of his ‘lame-brained’ journey across the highway. Following his reading of this scene, Berger concludes that the ‘counter-linguistic turns towards forms of unrepresentable alterity ... the other that is wholly other’;<sup>299</sup> what DeLillo calls a language of ‘unconstraining otherness’, or language of anarchic simulacrum. Wilder’s triumph is his ‘transcendent obliviousness’; it is this that enables him to cross the highway and defeat death. It is, however, mocked here as it never fully achieves the ‘unconstraining otherness’ of childhood babble, nor, indeed, does it restore the possibility of fiction held within the negative space of innocence in Bowen’s work, a lack that cannot exist to be filled and as such remains an ‘other that is wholly other’.

Wilder’s diffusion of destination penetrates into the unknowable realm of ‘that which follows upon death’, the moment beyond the end of history, and ruptures the perfect structure of the highway in a dispersal of meaning. The image of the tricycle also occurs at the end of *Ratner’s Star*, and similarly works to mock and undermine the readers’ ‘childlike trust in structural balance’, defusing the climax of the novel by diffusing its destination. A

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 354.

series of cryptic clues to decoding the inscrutable message (a message assumed to have been received from space) leads Billy, the novel's protagonist, to open the door of 'the hobby room' in which he finds the white tricycle (*RS*, p. 152). Billy receives a call on the videophone from Endor, the scientist driven to insanity by working on decoding the message before Billy, during the video call: 'The only thing he could see was a tricycle in the background dimly' (*RS*, p. 190). When Billy realises the flaw in his science, its failure to predict the oncoming eclipse, he clings to the tricycle which acts as an image of the scientists' 'childlike trust in structural balance'. Like the game structures that they continually reinvent, the novel's characters hope that this childhood object might defeat the 'chaos and death' of the universe in the place of science.

The scientists embrace the tricycle as a vehicle for meeting this chaos, for attempting to control it by driving towards 'death itself or what follows upon death.' The image of the tricycle, nevertheless, mocks the desires of these characters; the tricycle cannot master the chaos and death of the universe but becomes itself an image of chaos as it dominates the novel's comic but disconcerting final paragraph:

On the surface another figure moved, this one on a white tricycle, ... madly pedalling, a boy a bit too large for his chosen means of transportation ... He wore a jacket and tie. A measured length of darkness passed over him as he neared the hole and then he found himself pedalling in a white area between the shadow bands that precede total solar eclipse. This interval of whiteness, suggestive of space between perfectly ruled lines, prompted him to ring the metal bell. It made no sound, or none that he could hear, laughing as he was, alternately black and shadow-banded, producing as he was this noise resembling laughter, expressing vocally what appeared to be a compelling emotion, crying out as he was, grasping into the stillness, emitting as he was this series of involuntary shrieks, particles bouncing in the air around him, the reproductive dust of existence. (*RS*, p. 438).

The tricycle cuts through the black and white structure which resembles a chess board projected onto the landscape by the 'shadow bands' of the eclipse. For DeLillo, the tricycle is a haunting image of childhood which undermines the teleology of perfect structure. Like

the voice acts echoing throughout *Underworld*, for example the small cough in Nick's office, the strange incomprehensible and 'involuntary' expressions Billy makes here are another form of the whispers of childhood which grasp into the quiet of history's 'stark pages'.<sup>300</sup> In the place of rigidly structured games engineered to fill the void with meaning, these unstructured expressions penetrate into unrepresentable dimensions of the real. Objects such as tricycles contribute to the absurdity of these images; in their relationship with the commercialisation of play, they also initiate or provoke childhood babble, a language of simulacra, which works as an expression of discontent in tension with the tricycle emptied of its history. The 'little rotary blur' that the startled drivers on the highway search for meaning seems to represent an aesthetic rupture in the figure of the child; the child has become a challenging, inscrutable and dangerous image of the unrepresentable, the transcendent. This symbolic and knowledgeable child is constructed in opposition to capital but simultaneously exists as its other side; the tricycle mocks the reader's search for meaning as it returns toys and child's play to the whims of capital and commercialisation.

The repetition of spinning childhood toys, such as the tricycle, can be traced back to a potent Romantic image of the child revolutionary running against the wind to power his toy wind-mill in Wordsworth's 1805 and 1850 *Prelude*. Lamenting the descent of the high ideals of the French Revolution into the mass beheadings of the Great Terror in 1794, Wordsworth creates a haunting image of the insatiable desire of a child at play channelled through a toy wind-mill:

They found their joy,  
 They made it proudly, eager as a child,  
 (If light desires of innocent little ones  
 May with such heinous appetites be compared),  
 Pleased in some open field to exercise  
 A toy that mimics with revolving wings  
 The motion of a wind-mill; though the air

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<sup>300</sup> DeLillo, 'The Power of History'.

Do of itself blow fresh, and make the vanes  
 Spin in his eyesight, *that* contents him not,  
 But with the plaything at arm's length, he sets  
 His front against the blast, and runs amain,  
 That it may whirl the faster.<sup>301</sup>

The child's desire for the pinwheel to whirl faster captures the insatiable desire for more heads to fall during the Great Terror – the rotations of the pinwheel's vanes mirroring the continuous rise and fall of the guillotine. A long history of failed revolutions lies behind DeLillo's work as he examines how to bring about change in a landscape of global capital in which a Romantic grand narrative of revolution exists only as an anachronistic echo in children's games. Indeed, the Romantic revolution moves deathward towards a perfect structure that can no longer apply to a fragmented postmodern real. Wordsworth's child revolutionary playing with the pinwheel embodies the unified, creative subjectivity sought by Bill in *Mao II*, the 'lost game of the self, without doubt or fear': a fearless desire for 'more and better' channelled into the creation of an alternative novelistic structure. DeLillo's fiction, however, replaces this grand overturning of structure with a plurality of minor narratives: the historical voices of childhood, a language of life which expresses personal and national histories, not as grand narratives of progression moving towards perfect structure, but flashes, 'missing minutes', or subterranean fictions.

At the end of *Underworld*, as a crowd of people gather around Esmeralda's image in the orange juice advert, they become a potential market attracting vendors who sell, amongst other things, 'pinwheels that never stop spinning' (*U*, p. 823). The pinwheel as an image of revolution in correspondence with Esmeralda's story has been fully commodified and assimilated by capital. This subtle passing reference to the pinwheel is made strange by the artificial continued spinning of these pinwheels; the plotting without destination, or the

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<sup>301</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude* of 1850, p. 377, Book Tenth, lines 364-373.

“forever” of Bowen’s cat’s-cradle has at this point been fully commodified. In this postmodern context the pinwheel no longer requires the wind to make it spin, it operates independently without inviting the interaction of a child player, dismissive of the child’s desire to make it ‘spin faster’. This image of the pinwheel spinning, autonomously of the desperate desire of *The Prelude* child, parodies the idea of history as having reached a point of perfect self-sufficient structure. ‘Pinwheels that never stop spinning’, like Bowen’s kaleidoscope, diffuse the teleology on which a perfect structure, an end of history, is built; nevertheless, the return of history comes at this point in the novel only in the form of a fully commodified revolution, a toy divorced from human involvement or desire. The pinwheel is revolutionary history, or violence, moving on its own accord, but it is also the seasons turning for the child towards adulthood. The wild child as the child who does not grow up or grows sideways (dies like Esmeralda or the boy of Winander, or stays silent like Wilder on his tricycle) disrupts this automatic cycle.

The perfect, artificial structural balance of these ‘pinwheels that never stop spinning’, like Wordsworth’s pinwheel, actually represent the repetitive formula: ‘death itself or what follows upon death’. The pinwheel is played with by the Christ child in early sixteenth-century paintings such as *The Virgin and Christ* by Jan Provoost and Hieronymous Bosch’s the *Christ Child with a Walking Frame*, and is considered to be a symbol of Christ’s impending death, predicting his crucifixion and his rebirth which signals eternal life.<sup>302</sup> Wordsworth’s

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<sup>302</sup> Sandra Hindman, ‘Pieter Bruegel’s Children’s Games, Folly and Chance’, *The Art Bulletin*, 63:3 (Sep. 1981) pp. 447-475. The pinwheel also appears in Breugel’s painting *Children’s Games*, and is mirrored in the mills scattered across the landscape of *The Triumph of Death*. It has been noted that the symbolism of the whirligig or pinwheel is not stable during this period. Hindman and Erika Langmuir note that the pinwheel also symbolised folly and frivolity. Drawing attention to the child with a whirligig in Bosch’s *Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony* (who is clearly not meant to be Christ) Langmuir proposes that, if the whirligig is read as a symbol of folly, Bosch’s child with the whirligig in the *Christ Child with a Walking Frame* is not Christ and is instead symbolic of human games and folly – distraction at a time when Jesus is suffering for our sins as he is depicted carrying the cross on the reverse of this painting (Langmuir, *Imagining Childhood*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Walter S. Gibson similarly explains that art historians have suggested the child is not the infant Jesus but is, instead, ‘a symbol of the “folly of those who fail to grasp the meaning of Christ’s suffering.”’ (Dirk Bax quoted by Gibson in ‘Bosch’s Boy with a Whirligig: Some Iconographical Speculations’, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 8:1 (1975-1976) pp. 9-15, p. 9). There is no evidence that DeLillo was aware of this shifting symbolism of the pinwheel; however, adopting numerous competing meanings at once brings the pinwheel into correspondence with DeLillo’s use of simulacra. A

use of the child playing with a pinwheel to represent the ‘death itself or what follows upon death’ of failed revolution draws upon the Christian symbolism of the pinwheel, recreating the cyclical continuity of the Christian pinwheel while denying its hopefulness. DeLillo’s pinwheel, appearing after Esmeralda’s death and rebirth in the orange juice advert, alludes to this Christian symbolism; like Wordsworth’s pinwheel, DeLillo’s image suggests the failure of revolution at the end of his novel as Esmeralda’s rebirth assimilates her into capital. Both DeLillo’s and Wordsworth’s images of the pinwheel engage with the ambiguity of its symbolism; though the ceaseless spinning of the pinwheel suggests continuity following Esmeralda’s death, DeLillo’s pinwheel could also be read as an image of folly, of the failure of the crowd to grasp the meaning of this significant event: an ironic realisation of Macbeth’s assertion that ‘There is nothing serious in mortality./ All is but toys’.<sup>303</sup> Faced with this postmodern failure of meaning, Esmeralda’s transcendence, shot through with irony, nevertheless, becomes part of subterranean belief, a religious mysticism in which there lurks a destabilising uncertain hope.

Games with ‘rules and boundaries’ in DeLillo’s novels represent adult projections of a desire to master language and with it the chaos of history. In contrast, DeLillo’s wild children consistently undermine these designs, the babble of their voices bound to this chaos. In his interview with LeClair mentioned earlier, DeLillo juxtaposes ‘free-wheeling’ games with rigidly structured games, stating: ‘The games I’ve written about have more to do with rules and boundaries than with the free-wheeling street games I played when I was growing up.’<sup>304</sup> The extreme ‘free-wheeling’ of the pinwheel and the tricycle diffuses the teleology demanded by the rigid game structures which many of DeLillo’s characters desire. Cloaked in irony, however, these games work primarily as symbols of the failure of perfect structure.

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reading of the pinwheel as a symbol of folly and distraction in the face of the suffering of others is also pertinent considering where the pinwheel appears in the *Underworld*.

<sup>303</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, (stated by Macbeth), Act 2, Scene 3, p. 154.

<sup>304</sup> DeLillo, ‘An Interview with Don DeLillo’, p. 22.

In contrast, DeLillo's street games allude to a historical language. *It*, for example, is a language of post-Cold War shifting subterranean beliefs which simultaneously retains a fluid structure (a whisper of death itself or what follows upon death) as well as embracing the play of the signifier and the chaos of simulacra.

In representations of childhood, DeLillo's novels continually perform the discovery of the historical in the transcendent. Childhood babble is not ahistorical; instead it is the child's sonic mapping of a social or cultural milieu. Play-talk, then, returns to history the unvoiced voices of childhood and those experiences which resist conceptualisation. For DeLillo, it is not enough to succumb to the idea that a feeling, event or mode of being might be unrepresentable; instead, he wants to use his novels to develop a language that can fulfil representation, that can bring the inconceivable into language and as such into history. Throughout his oeuvre, DeLillo's character's struggle to decode messages in order to redeem language; in so doing they reflect the position of the reader, returning a paranoid reading practice to the 'transcendent obliviousness' of the child. This confronts the paranoid reader with the impossibility of interpreting an unreadable space, but also demonstrates the desire for this space *inherent* in paranoid interpretative practices. Ultimately, then, DeLillo wants his novels to move beyond this transcendent obliviousness in order to create a critical voice and in so doing to restore the possibility of an ethical fiction by disrupting the 'gamesmanship of fiction' with the pure games of postmodern wild children. In these games he locates the historical babble of children's voices and tracing the returns and repetitions of these games and the haunting whispers which accompany them, he produces a version of literary knowledge as reconciliation, enchanted by the argument of material things.

It would at first appear that a critical voice and an ethical fiction are totally compatible; indeed, that an ethical fiction cannot exist without the space for a critical voice. However, in his desire to write history onto the body of the child whilst capturing the ephemerality of childhood voices in lingering pre-linguistic verbal acts, DeLillo's uneasy

relationship with representation becomes apparent and the critical voice of *Underworld* is once again absorbed into the novel's own fluid paranoid structures. DeLillo's difficulty writing and reading the child, then, exposes the tensions in his relationship with the postmodern irony with which he is most often associated. The wild child acts as the site of tension between competing modernist and postmodernist impulses, a site through which DeLillo continually reinvests in the very principles of truth in linguistic meaning and representation that he is satirising. Situated between the material and the interpretable, history and language, this wild child illuminates the problems of trying to write an "ethical" fiction and abandons the reader to the suffering of a subjectivity struggling to exist, a subjectivity which haunts the novel as 'a sense of games and half-made selves' (*U*, 103).

## 5.

### Conclusion

*The toy is the child's earliest initiation into art ... The overriding desire of most little brats ... is to get at and see the soul of their toys ... He twists and turns the toy, scratches it, shakes it, bangs it against the wall, hurls it on the ground ... finally he prises it open, for he is the stronger party. But where is its soul?*<sup>305</sup>

The Romantic child paradigm depends upon the idea that children think differently to adults, an assumption which provokes a desire to see the child *clearly*, to read the child's knowledge. This desire leads us to continuously destroy and recreate the child with reading. Like Enlightenment and Romantic writers, writers in the twentieth century turned to the child to answer ontological concerns regarding language, subjectivity and the nature of reality; however, they wanted to bring these issues raised by and embodied in the child to bear on the organisation of thought and the conditions of possibility in a novel, the structural and stylistic dimensions of writing which might determine interpretative processes.

This thesis has identified a number of twentieth-century aesthetic and epistemological investments in versions of childhood which have emerged out of, then strayed from, the Romantic child paradigm. Depending on the text under consideration, I have employed psychoanalytic, materialist, and queer and poststructuralist theories to analyse the contradictory qualities and states that the child is forced to contain or represent throughout the twentieth century which include innocence and duplicity, opacity, simplicity and transparency, dangerous imagination, futurity and continuation of the past. I have suggested that these competing ideological positions not only impact the way we read representations of childhood but are also used by the writers under consideration in this

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<sup>305</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Philosophy of Toys', *Essays on Dolls*, trans. by Paul Keegan (London: Penguin, 1994) pp. 15-31, pp.19-24.

thesis to model the interpretative difficulties surrounding the work of writing and reading more broadly. Indeed, the ways in which James, Bowen and DeLillo represent the complications with writing and reading childhood, and subsequently the way they value the child's knowledge or innocence differently, is indicative of a challenge to conceptualisations of the creative labour involved in both writing and reading, and the writers' concerns with the versions of literary knowledge produced in their novels. This thesis has demonstrated the various ways in which child's play, as an innocent, obscure and shifting mode of behaviour, is imagined in the latter half of the twentieth century as threatening to capital and as such has been allegorised as a site of anti-capitalist resistance by writers who have identified a confluence between play and writing as a way to position their occupation. A focus on toys illuminates the dimension of representing childhood which tries to resolve the conflict between this vision of free child's play and a child defined at the same time as both consumer and consumed.

Considering the pressing material consequences of the political rhetoric of our period, in which the traditional hermeneutics of suspicion is continually "trumped" by a performance of transparency resulting in the unavailability of knowledge, this thesis began by suggesting that now may be the time to reconsider the stakes of reading Maisie and reading with her. From Maisie through to Bowen's and DeLillo's representations of childhood I traced the ways in which these textual children queer innocence in their performative experiments with fiction-making and truth games, and come to signify, through metaphors of child's play, toys and games, a literary encounter which makes available ways of reading the otherwise inaccessible whether that is a performative transparency, or a stubborn materiality.

The writers under consideration in this thesis have, to differing extents, explored the relationship between fictionality, plot and style through the metaphor of a game as a model through which to experiment with producing a coherent novelistic aesthetics or

epistemology. Reading and writing as part of this game are figured through theories of child's play which shift in significance throughout the twentieth century. All three writers are interested in moments when the symmetry or structural balance of these novelistic games comes under pressure and breaks down. In work on the gamelike social systems which comprise, what he terms the 'official world', Mark Seltzer asserts the importance of being able to 'see through' the game in order to play it;<sup>306</sup> the player must be equipped with the capacity to render the game transparent. This logic has some bearing on how we read work by James and DeLillo in that their novels expose their own games (and the failures of these games) to the reader made aware, in this process, of her own suspicious reading practices. The conditions for this exposure to occur are engineered through a tension between games and the opacity of child's play; in Bowen's novel this tension becomes a situation in which the unreality of the game is the space where, in a Winnicottian sense, there is no clear distinction between the seeing subject and the object to *see* or *see through*. It is this tension, then, that perhaps counter-intuitively creates the circumstances in which we can read alongside or inside the game of the novel. From James, through Bowen, to DeLillo, I have explored a continuing unease with the game model of writing and interpretation, and a consequent move away from the intentionality of games and the subjectivity of the child reader to an engagement with childhood objects such as toys which pose a challenge to the novel's traditional focus on modelling growth, interiority, and historical progression.

The Jamesian notion of literary subjectivity is tied to the idea of the missed encounter of reading. In *What Maisie Knew* subjectivity develops through failures of communication made productive by a hopeful reading practice. Maisie often encounters abysses of negativity, such as the one described in *The Prelude*'s boy of Winander scene, when the adults surrounding her continually fail to respond to her generous attempts to read alongside them and to participate in their games. However, the version of literary knowledge produced in

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<sup>306</sup> Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) p. 95.

the novel's reparative childlike reading practices facilitates the continuation of the narrative and the subversion of the deathliness of misreading. A Jamesian version of literary knowledge, in a sense, allows the reader to bring the isolating negativity of a Wordsworthian literary subjectivity into dialogue with the destructive, suspicious and reparative impulses of the child reader.

Bowen's *Eva Trout*, by contrast, embraces this disconsolate and abstruse negative presence of innocence as the borders between human and non-human collapse and characters become capricious toys only in the end to disrupt rather than reify the Romantic writer-as-child. Challenging the moral didacticism of the novel form, Bowen's work refocuses the reader on the processes of fiction-making by self-reflexively drawing attention to the work of the writer in tropes of toys and child's play. Bowen admires the Romantic desire to grasp the 'thing-in-itself' but demonstrates that we cannot overcome our perceptions; furthermore, our attempts to dominate the perceptible through stylistic performance, lies and fiction-making, cannot, in turn, simply determine a material reality, represented by toys, which refuses to be governed by human thought or language. This is performing a similar function to the failure of games in James and DeLillo; it pushes at the limits of representation and form to generate tensions between reading fiction-making and the authorial design of the plot.

DeLillo similarly returns fiction to material history; he does this, however, not to destroy the novel form but rather to restore its ethical and critical dimensions. Material history for DeLillo is not simply unrepresentable or unrecoverable in language; considering language as a fictitious mode which constitutes thought he explores the margins of language and the possibility of a metalanguage recoverable in children's voices which might work to return those lost voices to history. He approaches this cautiously with a consistent awareness of the ideological implications of investing in metaphors of games and play to redeem language. Nevertheless, his novels demonstrate a desire to resist the claim that an ethical

fiction must produce space for the unrepresentable; instead, he grapples with representation to develop an ethics orientated around this problem of speaking or being history.

I have demonstrated that attempting to represent “childhood” produces a series of haunting negative insights into subjectivity and interiority which continue to challenge the novel form and concepts of writerly identity. In his ‘Philosophy of Toys’, Baudelaire depicts the violence of the child seeking to locate the interiority of his toy; this becomes, for Baudelaire, an allegory for addressing the problem of learning how to read art. The child’s suspicion of the innocent toy and his consequent desire to gain knowledge of its hidden inside are manifested here in a Kleinian instinct to destroy the object of his reading. This leads us to ask, what happens, then, when we no longer require a knowledge gleaned through “exposure” in order to form a response, but instead read with the reparative impulse of the child, the child who reads *inside* the game of the text? Throughout this thesis I have analysed examples of texts which turn to childhood to conceptualise a version of reading founded in the negativity of an innocence which fails to respond. Out of this failure emerges the conditions for new forms of literary knowledge, knowledges informed by the difficulty of reading childhood and reading with the child which, therefore, enable us to interpret those discursive practices and sites of cultural fantasy which otherwise present themselves as resistant to theorisation.

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