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Undead Children:
*Reconsidering Death and the Child Figure in Late
Nineteenth-Century Fiction*

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Contents

Declaration	1
Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	4
I. Introduction	5
II. <i>“Even children do sometimes die”</i> : Walter Pater’s Immortal Child	33
i. Paterian Memory and “The Child in the House”	40
ii. “Emerald Uthwart”’s Pre-emptive Mourning	56
III. <i>“This fountain of radiance”</i> : The Transcendent Child in Vernon Lee	74
i. Shadowy Realms: “The Child in the Vatican”	85
ii. “Christkindchen” and the Aesthetic Ideal	96
iii. Sister Benvenuta’s Aesthetic Rapture	102
IV. <i>Sitting on the Doorstep</i> : The Divine Aesthetic Child in George MacDonald	123
i. Through the Mirror: Aesthetic Fantasy Worlds	136
ii. Back Again: Distancing and Spiritual Anxiety	154
V. <i>“You little horror”</i> : Henry James’ Monstrous Child	168
i. Powerful Invisibility: Living Dolls and Automata	177
ii. A Pantomime Performance of Childhood	189
iii. The Monstrosity of the Un-dead Child	214
VI. Conclusion	225
Works Cited	232

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by myself only. Except for ideas and passages properly acknowledged in the text, this writing is all my own work. The work has not been previously submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed,

Alison N Crockford

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Abstract

The Victorian obsession with the child is also often, in the world of literary criticism at least, an obsession with death, whether the death of the child itself or simply the inevitable death of childhood as a seemingly Edenic state of being. This study seeks to consider the way in which the child figure, in texts by four authors published at the end of the nineteenth century, is aligned with an inversion of this relationship. For Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, George MacDonald, and Henry James, the child is bound up instead with un-death, with a construction of death which seeks to remove the finitude, even the mortality, of death itself, or else a death which is expected or anticipated, yet always deferred.

While in “The Child in the House” (1878) and “Emerald Uthwart” (1892), Pater places the child at the nexus of his construction of a death which is, rather than a finite ending, a return or a re-beginning, Lee's interest in the child figure's unique access to a world of art, explored in “The Child in the Vatican” (1883) and “Christkindchen” (1897) culminates in a dazzling vision of aesthetic transcendence with “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child” (1906). MacDonald, for whom death is already never really death, uses the never-dead child figure in *At The Back of the North Wind* (1871) and *Lilith* (1895) as an embodiment of his own distinct engagement with aestheticism, as well as a means by which to express the simultaneous anticipation and depression he experienced in contemplation of death.

Finally James, in *What Maisie Knew* (1897), explores the child's inherent monstrosity as he crafts the possibility of a childhood which consciously refuses to die.

This study explores a trajectory in which the child's place within such reconsiderations of death grows increasingly intense, reaching an apex with MacDonald's fantastic worlds, before considering James's problematisation of the concept of the un-dead child in *What Maisie Knew*.

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Introduction

In May of 2011, a family photograph which included a deceased infant inspired worldwide outrage on the social networking site Twitter.¹ On a site which is no stranger to controversial trends, videos, and photographs, the “dead baby” trend, and the controversy which it accumulated, is one of the more intriguing because its subject, post-mortem photography, is far from a unique or shocking concept historically. One does not have to look far to find evidence of its popularity in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet when investigating Victorian and Edwardian post-mortem photography, it quickly becomes apparent that the phenomenon is subject to an increasing level of fascination in contemporary popular culture. Popular websites such as Thanatos.net offer the opportunity to indulge in the spectacle of the post-mortem photograph, while the images have also been incorporated often as part of a neo-Gothic aesthetic in twenty-first century horror films – prominent examples include Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001) as well as Peter Cornwell’s *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009) - and television

¹ See O’Neill, “When Twitter Trends Go Bad.”

programmes such as *American Horror Story* (2011). Such a resurgence of interest is not, the nature of such sources would suggest, an indication of a recovered experience of loss which the photographs represent.

Perhaps a renewed fascination in post-mortem photography is tied to the recognition that, as Judith Plotz points out, “in nothing more than its preoccupation with childhood death does the nineteenth century seem alien” (4); perhaps, as seems more likely, the interest stems from a sense that now more than ever, not least in its preoccupation with childhood death, the nineteenth century is becoming remarkably less alien. Twenty-first century Western culture certainly exhibits its own obsessions



Illustration 1: A carte-de-visite of a little girl on her deathbed. Photograph by Gustave Hotz. © Paul Frecker, London 2003. www.paulfrecker.com

with the loss of childhood whether figuratively – through either corruption (resulting in a paranoid focus on paedophilia) or from the violences inflicted on childish innocence by an increasingly consumerist, fast-paced, visual, digital society – or

else literally, in the death of the child. This latter may seem less pervasive generally, but the excessive media response to the deaths of Jon-Benét Ramsey, Peter Connelly (better known as “Baby P”), James Bulger, and the presumed death of Madeline McCann, as well as the extent to which such deaths have entered national and international consciousness regarding children, suggest that perhaps the intensity of such fervour makes up for a relative lack of quantity. Although the contemporary Western preoccupation with forms of “death” or loss pertaining to the child manifests quite differently, that they have come to culminate in frequent discussions regarding the death of childhood itself should prove an indication that the obsession which was

so central in the nineteenth century is certainly not “alien” any more – if indeed it ever was. In light of this, the renewed interest in post-mortem photographs, specifically of children, seems more likely to stem from what the photographs themselves offer. For the relatives and friends of the deceased, they were undoubtedly defined by their engagement with the personal experience of loss, but once outside of that personal circle, the photograph as object – as text to be read – offers a slightly different, and potentially more disturbing, form of comfort through the visual suggestion of life after death.

Nicola Bown points out in her article “Empty Hands and Precious Pictures:

Post-mortem Portrait

Photographs of Children”, of the surviving post-mortem photographs, “the vast majority [are] of infants and small children” (8). Given that, in many ways, Lewis Carroll’s photographs have become the visual face of the Victorian



Illustration 2: "Where dreadful fancies dwell."
 Photograph by Lewis Carroll, 1873. Image taken from the Princeton University Library's Lewis Carroll Portfolio online. <http://libweb2.princeton.edu>

“cult of the child”, it is intriguing to note that they find their mirror image in the post-mortem child images. This mirroring becomes disturbingly literal when a photograph like Carroll’s “Where dreadful fancies dwell” (Illustration 2) is compared to post-mortem photographs; however, beyond this literal similarity both are equally tied to a fascination with the enigma posed by the figure of the child. James R. Kincaid, in *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992) attributes Carroll’s need to photograph his child subjects to an erotic urge to take action “against transience on behalf of the desire to possess and hold the child in time”

(199); if Carroll's photographs constitute an attempt to fix the child in time, denying in some small measure the inevitability of its physical and mental growth, then the post-mortem photographs offer a similar suggestion of temporal disruption. These images of the dead child become, in Bown's words, "a small, substitutive image of the baby" (19), and the added tactile experience of the photograph-as-object, she suggests, evokes "the idea of an impossible, Pygmalian touch in which the infant is



Illustration 3: A *carte-de-visite* of a little boy. Photograph by H Dupperon fils. © Paul Frecker, London 2003. www.paulfrecker.com

brought back to life" (21).

In some ways, as Robert Harrison suggests in *The Dominion of the Dead* (2003), the photograph itself is always mortuary, always an echo of the Roman death masks, the *imago*, through which the deceased "lived on once more once the disembodiment process was realized" (148). Yet the post-mortem photograph is a much more literal encapsulation of this confusion between states of life and death.

Many photographs were deliberately constructed in such a way as to emulate life.

The bodies were posed to suggest sleep, and the photo itself was timed in consideration of decomposition, ensuring that the features remained as lifelike as possible (Bown 11): each technique is imposed in order to suggest some illusion of life. In some photos, the progression of decay hinders a complete closure of the eyelids, as in Illustration 3. The resulting glitter of eyes still partially open evokes sight, and with it the potential that at any moment the lids will flutter and the child will wake, even as it simultaneously provides a stark and grotesque reminder of rigour mortis, of death itself. As Jay Ruby notes in *Secure the Shadow: Death and*

Photography in America (1995), “sometimes the body was placed in an upright position – often in a chair. The eyes were open or even painted on afterwards... the illusion the photographer was trying to create is not one of a person at rest, but alive” (72), a specific style of construction which he labels “alive, yet dead” (72). Yet even those images which do not exhibit such deliberate techniques constitute an image of the child which is, and yet is not, dead: it is the very nature of the post-mortem photograph.

It is an image which is not at all unique to post-mortem photography, as this study hopes to demonstrate. While such photographic memento mori were still in vogue during the late nineteenth century, the literary world was offering a similar construction in the form of child figures who were not only themselves depicted as immortal or eternal, but who became encompassed in a complication of death itself. Such child figures came to be placed at the centre of a re-conceptualisation of



Illustration 4: A little girl propped up in a wicker chair. Photograph by Anderson of Groton. © Paul Frecker, London 2003. www.paulfrecker.com

death, a process not defined by an immortal individual but by a representation which refuses the standard definition of death as a finite end. It is this relationship between the child figure in late-nineteenth century literature and representations of death which I intend to explore in this study. In a selection of short fiction and novels by Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, George MacDonald and Henry James which were published during this period, the centrality of the child to each text is bound up within constructions of death in which the act of dying is either bypassed, denied, or

reconsidered entirely. Furthermore, the child frequently serves as a catalyst for this process, intimately tied to the reconsideration of death as other than mortal.

Critical discussions of depictions of child death and a more general alignment of the child figure with images and ideas of death in Victorian literature are certainly extensive. Yet, while such discussions have offered a number of interpretations of the relationship between literary child figures and death, raising issues ranging from immortality to eroticism, they by no means constitute an exhaustive analysis of the topic. Turning away from an analytical approach which is focused on the specific notion of the dead child itself, and on the implications that death, in all its finality, has when it meets with the boundless potential of the child, this study seeks to demonstrate the benefits which a reconsideration of the relationship between death and the literary child figure can offer understandings of the nineteenth-century obsession with both. For it certainly is no secret that representations of child-death permeate Victorian literature; as David Grylls points out, “the two leading attitudes to children converged on the coffin and grave. It was hardly surprising that the youngsters in fiction, exploited by both of these literary conventions, were unlikely to survive very long” (41). Peter Coveney’s rather broad discussion of literary children in *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature* (1957) equates such an intense collision of children and death with a kind of perversion of the Romantic child:

The Victorians seem to have taken to themselves the romantic image of childhood, and negated its power. The image is transfigured into the image of an innocence which dies. It is as if so many placed on the image of childhood the weight of their own disquiet and dissatisfaction, their impulse to withdrawal, and in extremity their own wish for death. (149)

Coveney goes on to describe mid- to late- Victorian representations of children as “a remarkable phenomenon when a society takes the child (with all its potential significance as a symbol for fertility and growth) and creates a literary image, not only of frailty, but of life extinguished, of life that is better extinguished, of life, so to

say, rejected, negated at its very root” (149). This seeming criticism of Victorian representations of child-death is carried through to some degree in Robert Pattison’s *The Child Figure in English Literature* (1978), although he seems to associate the trend with Dickens in particular, in whose novels, such as *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he notes “the figure of the child is an extension of [Dickens’] sentiments on nature. [Nell’s] innocence, like the innocence and beauty of nature, is somehow fatal” (80). In a statement that is undoubtedly applicable to a great many Victorian works of literature, Pattison wryly suggests that “innocent children always have a certain morbid quality in Dickens, even those that he permits to survive” (80).

However, as Grylls points out in *Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (1978), literary representations of child-death often go a step, or two, further: “the spectacle of a child dying, it seems, was so relished by those who were fond of children that enjoyment of it was even assumed in the potential participants” (40). The level of anticipation – bordering on excitement – with which some child characters experience the deathbed scene is only one of the sentimentalised qualities of such depictions which inspired Oscar Wilde’s famous comment that “one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing” (qtd in Lerner, 180). Kimberley Reynolds draws upon the increasing presence of literary children who “like to die” (Reynolds 171) to support her rather flamboyant assertion that “fantasies based on and celebrating the deaths of children” find such popularity amongst adult readers because of their “ability to explore, without being seen to do so, the ultimate taboo – *desiring* the death of children” (176) in “Fatal Fantasies: the Death of Children in Victorian and Edwardian Fantasy Writing”. Yet each of these conceptions of Victorian literary child-death carries with it the common assumption that such representations constitute a kind of destruction or perversion of the nature of the child itself. What if

this is not, at least not universally, the case?

Reynolds and Gillian Avery, in the introduction to *Representations of Childhood Death* (2000), would have us believe that “children who die are problematic because they can only signify failure: failure of the scientific and caring systems which should have kept them alive, and failure of the child to achieve the mixture of goals and possessions which amount to a lifestyle” (8). Here once again the death of the child is a failure, the destruction of that potential which is its only valuable asset. Yet in looking at a selection of authors who explore the intersection of the themes of “childhood” and “death”, I do not see evidence that this is entirely the case. Each of the texts which this study considers, encompassing different genres and styles, constructs child figures which are, in different ways, intimately associated with death in a way which is far from destructive and deny the implication that death must always indicate an inherent failure on the part of the child. Certainly, in “Literary Ways of Killing a Child: The 19th Century Practice” (1995), Judith Plotz makes a strong case for, at the very least, a complication of such pessimistic assumptions. She points out that “death in nineteenth-century literature is less a destroyer than a strange preserver. When children die in literature, they are assimilated to fixity, usually perishing in ways that make them clean, quiet, immobile, and permanent” (3).

Plotz is not the only critic to complicate such inherently negative interpretations of literary child-death in the nineteenth century. Reinhard Kuhn’s exploration of the topos in *Corruption in Paradise: The Child in Western Literature* (1982) ends on a rather unsatisfactory note overall, never progressing beyond the general idea that “the death of the child is a commentary on the state of many or the state of God. It can also be a commentary on the state of childhood itself” (186), or that “the implications of the death of the child are as complex and varied as the many

forms it takes” (196). However, he does suggest that “for the child death occasionally represents an escape from an intolerable reality. Even more positively, it can sometimes even be a longed-for condition that transcends reality” (193). Both of these descriptions suggest an intriguing engagement with the theme of non-death with which this study is concerned. Plotz’s article directly explores ways in which the dead child is transformed from absence to presence, often through methods or associations which carry with them implications of immortality. Similarly, Kuhn raises the idea of death as a condition which transcends reality, and while I do believe that this notion of transcendence is crucial to understanding some representations of child-death, Kuhn’s description seems limited to the transcendence which death confers transcendence upon the child, removing them to a sphere beyond reality. This study, however, is more concerned with the way in which the child figures within a reconsideration of death which transcends the condition of mortality itself: child figures here are not, as Plotz suggests, an attempt to “transform dead children into immortal children”. Rather than removing the dead child figure to a state of immortality which exists beyond death, these texts rely upon the qualities of children to reconfigure death, undermining its finitude and transforming it instead into a process that incorporates immortality.

The first chapter focuses on Walter Pater’s “The Child in the House” (1878), and “Emerald Uthwart” (1892), both texts which depend largely on temporal disruption which converges on a central child figure. Yet prior even to discussing the texts themselves, it is useful to consider a small selection of Pater’s other writings which are more closely tied to his Hellenism, specifically *Plato and Platonism* and “Demeter and Persephone” in *Greek Studies*. These essays reveal Pater’s perception of children to be already founded in the disruption of a linear timeline. His description of an eternal child-self which lingers within the “dialogue of the mind”

(*Plato and Platonism* 183) as well as that of the “mysterious design of the goddess to make the child immortal” in “Demeter and Persephone” (*Greek Studies* 114) set up the centrality of the immortal child to Pater’s conception of childhood. That said, when we turn to his short fiction this desire to make the child immortal develops into a process through which the child transforms death itself. In “The Child in the House” this is achieved largely through Pater’s construction of memory itself as a recurrence – a return to what is remembered which is yet an enhanced, new experience of the past – as well as the representation of the central character, Florian, both as a recollected-child and as a *revenant*, a ghostly presence within his own re-experienced past. In depicting Florian as a revenant, a creature returned from the dead to haunt the living, the text thus raises the spectre of a death which must have, and yet has not, taken place. Through this death which has not yet occurred, the text explores the re-construction of death itself as a return to the child’s world – both the physical space of the childhood home and the state of childhood itself.

In “Emerald Uthwart”, on the other hand, the refusal of a linear narrative progression is even more aggressive, and it is primarily accomplished through the text’s emulation of an obituary. The life story of Emerald Uthwart, instead of focusing on his *life*, opens with his death. Since Emerald is dead even as the text begins, his inevitable death haunts the rest of the text, and yet it is only in the description of his childhood that repeated references to his death directly intrude into the narrative. The pattern then reverses itself during Emerald’s deathbed scene, his childhood past resurfacing variously as he prepares himself to die. The text also constructs a multifarious textual temporality in which Emerald’s future and past seem to exist simultaneously. In a text which has typically been read by William Shuter, in “The Arrested Narrative of ‘Emerald Uthwart’”, and Wolfgang Iser, in *Walter Pater*:

The Aesthetic Moment, as inherently static, there is a stunning conflation of movement and stasis in which the hero is depicted in the cross-hairs of intersecting temporalities. The event of his death, marked by the re-intrusion of his childhood world, is ingrained with images of life, the condition of death itself becoming confused with an excessive vitality. Here, too, as in the earlier text, the natural, linear temporality of death is disrupted, and the act of dying intimately connected with a return to the world of childhood.

It is perhaps not surprising that the analysis will continue on to look at a selection of texts by Vernon Lee in the second chapter; the influence of Pater on Lee's aestheticism is often cited, to the point where it borders on hyperbole.² There are, for example, some few similarities in their engagement with the child figure – namely in the attention paid to unique child-spaces, and, of course, in the role that the child plays in a conception of non-death. In contrast to “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart”, both concerned with the space of the childhood home, Lee's child spaces are not directly associated with *childhood* so much as they are concerned with an invented space to which the child belongs. These spaces are defined by their confusion of the states of life and death, a definition solidified by depictions of living statues, puppets, and dolls which are neither alive nor dead. They also become an intrinsic part of the child's aesthetic transcendence, in which the model of Christian rapture is appropriated to depict the ascension of the aesthetic child, fusing death and life together in the process. In a reading of “The Child in the Vatican” (1883), I shall explore the way in which this child-space is directly paralleled with an aesthetic world, the two overlapping outside of the mundane adult space of the Vatican; this overlap, it is revealed, is dependent upon a privileged

² See Gunn's *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (3), Brake's “Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle” (40-57); Young's *The Victorian Eighteenth Century: An Intellectual History* (166), Zorn's *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (xvi), and Robbins' “Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?” (150).

vision of art which Lee affords the child figure. In “Christkindchen” (1897), she speaks of an “Ideal”, which is constructed specifically as an aesthetic Ideal, to which the child is privy while adults can catch but glimpses.

The second half of “The Child in the Vatican”, in which Lee expounds upon the importance of form and beauty, reveals this exclusion to be an issue of aesthetic immediacy; the child’s tenuous relationship with language allows it access to a vision of the aesthetic Ideal which from which the adult is barred. For Lee’s child figures, and the role that they play in a reconstruction of death as non-mortal, are much more intimately tied to her aestheticism than are Pater’s. Her earlier essay, “Ruskinism”, which was published alongside “The Child in the Vatican” in *Belcaro: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1883), clearly demonstrates the vehemence with which she sought the removal of religious or moral valuations from the consideration of the overall aesthetic value of art. It also sets up the opposition which characterises her short-fiction piece, “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child” (1906), in which the child figure – which I consider to be Sister Benvenuta herself, and not the Christ child as the title may suggest – is surrounded by markers of her ties to the aesthetic Ideal, and placed in direct opposition to the staid religious world of the convent in which she lives. This contrast culminates in the child figure’s triumph as Sister Benvenuta, enveloped in an extra-linguistic space of aesthetic radiance, ascends in a moment of rapture which appears to transform death itself into life. She leaves on the outskirts of this aesthetic transcendence her cousin, Atlanta Badoer, stranded within a world of language, a reminder of the triumph of the aesthetic Ideal over the moral, linguistic, religious limitations of the adult mind.

The fact that Sister Benvenuta is, undoubtedly, a physically fully-grown adult does not detract from her position as one of Lee’s most clearly represented and detailed child figures. The use of grown-up children is not in any way a technique

unique to Lee, nor is it in any way uncommon; Malcolm Andrews' *Dickens and the Grown-up Child* (1994) offers an in-depth exploration of such characters in Dickensian novels. Dickens' grown-up children, as Andrews conceives them, range from the "comically grotesque version of the grown-up child" of Miss Ninetta Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby* (73), to the "premature little adults" (79) like *Oliver Twist*'s Artful Dodger, and further to "the exemplary male grown-up child" Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations* (89). Andrews' study seeks to identify "anomalies in Dickens's treatment of the relationship between childhood and maturity," as Dickens "negotiat[es] this relationship, sometimes, in the fiction, by constructing models of full human maturity that incorporate undamaged the sensibility of childhood" (172). Yet, while Sister Benvenuta does, in part, echo "the ideal mature human" (25) which Andrews suggests emerges as "one in whom the childlike virtues and powers coexist harmoniously with the adult's strengths, not one in which the grown person has wholly outgrown his childhood" (25), her construction is deeply tied to Lee's very specific aesthetic theories. Lee's grown-up child is not necessarily part of "a programme of cultural reform" (25) as Andrews describes Dickens' and Wordsworth's proposals, but part of a very clear programme of aesthetic reform, of an attempt to assert the superiority of pure aesthetic values over those tempered with religious and moral elements.

George MacDonald's Mr Vane in *Lilith* (1895) is similarly depicted as developing into a grown-up child who is reminiscent of Dickens' and Lee's in his attempted reintegration of lost childlike virtues. However, as I shall explore in the third chapter, MacDonald's construction of a grown-up child is more akin to Lee's in that it cannot be read purely as a means of exploring or "reconciling the primitivist and progressivity polarity as well as the adult-child polarity that emerges in the nineteenth century" (Andrews 25). In fact, in Vane MacDonald's attempts to create a

grown-up child are a failure, whether as a result of a conscious decision or unconscious anxiety. The third chapter explores MacDonald's child figures in both *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), revealing ties between the child, death, and MacDonald's spirituality and aestheticism which shed light on the nature of his failed grown-up child.

Much of the chapter eschews limiting conceptions of MacDonald's fantasy fiction as consumed entirely within a Christian or fantasy genre framework. Such frameworks have defined the approaches of a large portion of critical discussions about MacDonald's work, particularly on the part of those whose readings have been most influential amongst MacDonald scholars, like Rolland Hein's *The Harmony Within* (1982), David Robb's *God's Fiction: Symbolism and Allegory in the Works of George MacDonald*, and Colin Manlove's "A Reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*" (2008), *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (1992), and "The Logic of Fantasy and the Crisis of Closure in *Lilith*" (2008). Instead, MacDonald's writing – *Lilith*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *Phantastes*, as well as several of his *Unspoken Sermons* – reveals an aestheticism which relies on an indistinguishable union of the spiritual and the aesthetic. While MacDonald was not, in any traditional sense, an aesthete, a comparison with Pater's, Ruskin's, and Wilde's definitions of aestheticism indicates that his work was influenced not only by the established movement itself, but also by what can only be described as his own aesthetic theory, in which an adoration of Art and Beauty is fused seamlessly with his already comparatively radical interpretation of Calvinist theology. And central to this spiritual aestheticism is the child figure, whose extra-linguistic qualities and unique properties of vision – like those of Lee's child figures – leave it perfectly placed as a figure through whom MacDonald can mediate his own spiritual anxieties about the experience of death.

Both *Lilith* and *North Wind* are centred around the creation of fantastic worlds which are characterised by MacDonald's aestheticism; these worlds, when considered in comparison with MacDonald's representation of children and the child-like, appear to be constructed according to a continuum of unknowable states of mind of which the child-mind was undoubtedly a part. Looking to Sally Shuttleworth's discussion of depictions and studies of child development in literature and medicine throughout the nineteenth century, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine 1840-1900* (2010), I will consider the way in which understandings of child perception as akin to liminal states of mind – specifically sleep and death – underpin MacDonald's fantasy worlds. Yet despite MacDonald's overt assertions that it is only through a rediscovery of the essential "childgood" within oneself that one can know the divine, and indeed despite the extensive description of these fantasy realms and our own integration within them as readers, the adult world of Vane, of the narrator in *North Wind*, and of the reader, is kept always at an impassable distance from the Edenic child-world within the fantasies. The inability of the grown-up child to access the glittering world at the top of Mount Paradiso is an expression of the tensions which lay hidden beneath – even embedded within – MacDonald's fervent spirituality, and a suggests a perpetual failure to bridge the gap between the reality of life on earth, and death's promise of immortality to come.

In his discussion of Dickensian grown-up children, Andrews makes a comment about those instances in which the adult-child is depicted negatively which I feel raises an interesting point regarding the child figures featured in this study, be they physically grown or not. He notes that

Children in whom childhood has not naturally ripened, but in whom maturity is forced, are deprived of what Dickens regards as the proper culture of childhood - the cultivation of the sentiments and affections, playing with toys, knowledge of the world of fairy-tale. Such

deprivations produce deformed adults. The negative image of the grown-up child is the manifestation of that deformity. (Andrews 84)

I point to this particular passage because I feel that it reveals a conspicuous absence in the depictions of children in texts by Lee, Pater, MacDonald, and Henry James. Andrews refers specifically to the importance of play in the natural development of children; the same emphasis characterises Robert Louis Stevenson's essay, "Child's Play" (1878), as Shuttleworth points out (68). In fact, Stevenson goes so far as to suggest that "in the child's world of dim sensation, play is all in all. 'Making believe' is the gist of his whole life, and he cannot so much as take a walk except in character" (235). For Stevenson, play is not simply one element of the culture of childhood; it is fundamental to childhood itself.

Yet the element of play is curiously absent from the texts comprising this analysis. Instead, their children are solemn, and while Lee's, Pater's, and MacDonald's child figures certainly do seem to retain what Andrews identifies as the other two central aspects of child culture – namely "the cultivation of the sentiments and affects", and "knowledge of the world of fairy-tale" – in spades, they are curiously lacking in that element which seems, of the three, to be the most unique to childhood. Characteristics and props of child's play (consider the importance of laughter to MacDonald's children, and of dolls to Lee's Sister Benvenuta) are curiously devoid of any playful associations, as if they have been plucked from the playtime fantasy and clothed instead in solemn significance. One has only to remember Lee's essay "Limbo" (1897), in which the "wooden toy house", "the Children's Rabbits' House... what the children used to call the 'Rabbits' Villa'" (4) becomes a site of limbo, a door to a kind of artistic purgatory which is marked by its association with "the graves of children long dead... despite the grown-up folk who may come and say 'It was I'" (5). The childlike qualities of these child figures have been distilled to an unrealistic ideal and stripped of that sense of play which is such a

defining quality of childhood – or at least post-Romantic Western conceptions of childhood – both in reality and, as Dickens and Stevenson indicate, literature.

It is more interesting still that Dickens, according to Andrews, sees such deprivations as necessarily resulting in a kind of deformity, for as I hope to demonstrate in the fourth and final chapter, Henry James' child figure, as constructed in *What Maisie Knew* through the titular character herself, raises a vision of childhood which is monstrous, one might even say in some respects deformed. Furthermore, Maisie is the only one of the child figures considered within this analysis who does not, I would argue, demonstrate either a cultivation of sentiments and affections or any knowledge of fairy-tale, despite attempts to make it appear otherwise; this suggests that in writing *Maisie* James is responding to the kind of discomfitingly solemn childhood depicted in the texts of Pater, Lee, and MacDonald. In this final chapter, I explore the text's construction of Maisie as an inherently static child figure whose lack of developmental progress is concealed by the developing expectations and perceptions of the adults with whom she interacts and who influence our experience of her, most crucially the narrator himself.

The notion of Maisie as a static figure stands in opposition to a significant critical tradition which has been focused on the concept of Maisie's journey from child to adult, her development as it unfolds throughout the novel. It is a notion which has been expressed by Merla Wolk in "Narration and Nurture in *What Maisie Knew*" (1983), Edward Wasiolek in "Maisie: Pure or Corrupt" (1960), Muriel Shine in *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (1968), and May Cross in *Henry James: Contingencies of Style* (1993) – not to mention Honeyman. Yet, as I aim to demonstrate, the crisis which Maisie undergoes early in the novel, her "moral revolution", is the last indication of any growth or change; the natural narrative of a child's development is imposed on Maisie by the adults around her. This jarring

disconnect between the child figure and the way in which she is revealed to the reader is just one of the ways in which I consider Maisie as a conception of a “monstrous” child. The text also reveals gaps in its conceptualisation of Maisie which demonstrate her awareness of the role of “child” which she is expected to fill, and, more disturbingly, of the fact that her awareness passes entirely unnoticed by the adults around her. While Shuttleworth explores the nature of Maisie’s performance of childhood as that which dooms her to passivity, I suggest that it is this recognition of her own ability to go unnoticed – crucially marked by the uncanny image of dolls come to life – which gives her power in her relationships with adults and enables her manipulation of those around her.

These aspects of childhood are rendered monstrous in the most etymological sense of their ability to *show*,³ to reveal that which has been excluded from ideal constructions of the child figure. Maisie’s monstrosity is somewhat vaguely referred to in her final confrontation with her biological parents, but takes its most concrete shape in the choosing of sides which marks the novel’s closing pages. In the end, the most unnerving and monstrous element of Maisie’s pantomime of childhood is her deliberate refusal to let it die. For Pater, Lee, and MacDonald, the notion of an eternal childhood, or child-self, was so powerful that it became a catalyst in a transformation of death itself, and this seemed to necessitate an amputation of the deeply disturbing elements which seem to be an inherent part not only of the eternal child, but of this process of transformation. Each of the texts explored in the first three chapters is characterised by images or experiences which would traditionally be associated with Gothic horror, or at the very least situated firmly in the uncanny valley – consider Pater’s corporeal-yet-ghostly *revenants*, and Lee’s grotesquely

³ The word “monster” is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning an omen or wonder, but which is itself descended from *moneō*, “to warn or advise”. It is also etymologically related to the word *monstrare*, “to point out, show.” “Monster, *n., adv., and adj.*” *OED Online*; see also Shildrick *Embodying the Monster* 12.

beautiful living puppets, while nearly any vignette from any of MacDonald's fantasies would surely suffice to disturb – yet in each instance they are presented in such a way as to neuter their horrific potential. James returns to the idea of a childhood that does not die but, by placing it within the realm of the child's own agency, twists it just enough to restore those oft-sanitised anxieties, taking a concept which is depicted as transcendent and literalising it, revealing the monstrosity already embedded within.

It should not be surprising, then, that Maisie – the monstrous child, the child who refuses the death of her childhood – stands separate from her contemporaries in this study in that she, unlike Pater's, Lee's, or MacDonald's child figures, *plays*.

Although stripped of two-thirds of Dickens' culture of childhood, the cultivation of affection and the knowledge of fairy-tale, it could be argued that all Maisie does is play, albeit in a distorted appropriation of the word. She performs and manipulates, yes, but does so without malice, inspired instead to simply participate in the games taking place around her as a means of entertainment. It is thus interesting that both methods by which Maisie engages with these games, her performance and her manipulation, have been hotly contested within Jamesian criticism on the novel.

Similarly, the notion that Maisie might be in some way corrupt or depraved was the subject of an antagonistic exchange of ideas between F.R. Leavis and Marius Bewley, published in Bewley's *The Complex Fate: Hawthorne, Henry James, and Some Other American Writers* (1952); indeed, very idea that Maisie is monstrous has been directly refuted by Joseph Hynes in "The Middle Way of Miss Farange: A Study of James's *Maisie*" (1965). These arguments are founded upon the assumption that manipulation, performance, and monstrosity are the sole property of Maisie's parents and step-parents, and are thus tied to negative concepts of corruption in the text. If Maisie manipulates, it is typically read as an indication of her corruption; if she is

monstrous, it is an evil imparted to her through the relentlessly degenerate influence of her parents and guardians. Yet why must Maisie's conscious engagement with, and manipulation of, the situations in which she finds herself stem from – or lead to – some sort of corrupt, precocious nature? Maisie plays and she is monstrous; she is the non-dead child, but what is most disturbing about these revelations is the ease with which they are concealed, not by Maisie herself, but by the way in which we view the child. It is significant that the crisis which indicates Maisie's awareness of her place within an adult world is marked by the image of living dolls, reminiscent of glassy eyes which we willingly assume to be vacant.

James's departure from the treatment of un- or non-dead children considered elsewhere in this discussion leads to some consideration of his place in relation to the contemporaries with which he seems so separate. The connections between Pater and Lee are, I believe, self-evident, not only in the influence of the former on the latter and their shared aestheticism, but in aspects of their approach towards the construction of children and a more explicit reconsideration of death. Although MacDonald's consideration of non-death is initially indicative of a traditionally Christian concept of spiritual immortality, in working through the spiritual tensions present in his fantasy novels he constructs a persistent deferral of life after death. Constructing life itself as a form of death from which one emerges in dying, passing on to a truer life in heaven, he then places this transition always just out of arm's reach; death – and through it life – is always delayed, kept in a position outside of the temporality of the novel itself. Life itself becomes the non-death to which we are consigned, and although this idea is exponentially more pessimistic than Pater's or Lee's re-visioning of death, it nevertheless constitutes a reconsideration of the event itself, and one which is bound up with the child. Furthermore, in reading MacDonald's fantasy through a lens of aestheticism, remarkable bonds are revealed

which link his deeply Christian work to the anti-religious Lee's.

There are links, too, between MacDonald's un-dead child figures and James', particularly in the central place that anxieties occupy in both constructions of the child. Of course, the nature of the anxieties differs – *Maisie* does not seem to engage at all with the spiritual tensions which characterise MacDonald's work – as do the ways in which the texts engage with them: MacDonald's fantasy novels seem to be expressions of an unconscious or unacknowledged anxiety, whereas James' construction of Maisie is almost undoubtedly a precise and deliberate stirring up of others' unexpressed, unacknowledged anxieties. Yet both hinge on the sense that there is something uncomfortable about the configuration of the child figure as a means for reconsidering, and getting beyond, a finite death. As MacDonald looks to the child figure to form a tangible connection between the physical world and the spiritual, he inevitably finds himself unable to complete this conceptualisation in his fiction. James, on the other hand, while perhaps not deliberately responding to these particular texts' representation of children, nor to their precise re-visioning of the experience of death, almost certainly can be seen to engage with wider traditions of literary children who, as Plotz and Susan Honeyman, in *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction* (2005) have made clear, were often transformed into immortal figures or subsumed within images of eternity, or else cast as atemporal beings who bear with them the promise of eternal childhood for the adults reading (and writing) their stories.

Choosing to analyse texts by two confirmed aesthetes, while considering a third in light of aestheticism, will quite naturally lead to certain conclusions about James' place in relation to the other three. Two opposing assumptions might present themselves: the first is that the analyses of texts by Lee, Pater, and MacDonald serve as evidence that James' novel will be read, like MacDonald's, in light of the author's

sympathies towards, and engagement with, the aesthetic movement. The second is that the same selection of authors must suggest a reading of James in reaction against nineteenth-century aestheticism. In both *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (2007) and the essay “Aestheticism and Decadence” in David McWhirter’s *Henry James in Context* (2010) Michèle Mendelssohn has made a persuasive argument for James’ influence on aestheticism, and its influence on him, in a complex engagement with characters and concepts now considered canonical. Jonathan Freedman describes a similarly nuanced mutual influence in *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1993): “James’s encounter with British aestheticism significantly transformed both his own fiction and his understanding of his fictional vocation; but James’s response to aestheticism had considerable impact on aestheticism itself, remaking or remodelling it in such a way as to prepare it for full entry into the cultural mainstream under the sign of modernism” (xxvi). David Garrett Izzo and Daniel T. O’Hara’s *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement* (2006) presents a collection of essays which complicate James’ engagement with aestheticism, yet still confirm that his association with the aesthetic movement unfolding throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth century was strong, if not necessarily comfortable.

Even James’ preface to *What Maisie Knew* seems to set up the expectation of an aesthetic child figure: he speaks there of Maisie’s evident ability to

Len[d] to poorer persons or things, by the mere fact of their being involved with her and by the special scale she creates for them, a precious element of dignity... They become, as she deals with them, the stuff of poetry and tragedy and art; she has simply to wonder, as I say, about them, and they begin to have meanings, aspects, solidities, connexions – connexions with the ‘universal!’ – that they could scarce have hoped for. (8)

This description of Maisie’s ability to transform the low, vulgar world around her into one of poetry and art is eerily reminiscent of Lee’s concept of the child figure,

whose unique vision of the world is inspired by its intrinsic kinship with an aesthetic realm beyond our own. For Lee, the child effectively transforms the world around it into one of art and beauty in a way denied adults; it is not at all dissimilar to what James proposes in his preface. Yet the zeal with which James refers to Maisie's transformative properties seems to be laced, not with aestheticism per se, but with a parodied aestheticism, undermining the description as one which is meant to be read at face value. Certainly the description hinges on the construction of the child figure as an aesthetic catalyst, which does not at all characterise the depiction of Maisie that the novel offers. The preface is often misleading in this way, for it is only in the preface that any reference to the death of Maisie's childhood occurs; as I shall argue in chapter four, such a death is not only absent in the novel itself, it is deliberately rejected by the heroine. By evoking an aesthetic child figure, then, the preface suggests that Maisie will fulfil the role of passive aesthetic child figure catalyst; it raises the spectre of an aestheticism which the novel itself does not, as I read it, solidify.

My aim in this study is to draw connections between the representation of the child figure and its association with or role in conceptions of non-death, and not to tie these explorations to a particular literary movement. Aestheticism figures somewhat less directly in my discussions of the Paterian child (although the significance of his Hellenism is explored in some depth), certainly not as prominently as in the discussions of regarding Lee and MacDonald. The same is true of James. Although, in her essay on "Aestheticism and Decadence", Mendelssohn identifies James' child figures as a kind of focal point or embodiment of his aestheticism, noting that "in his fiction, James often uses children as ciphers for his engagement with aesthetic and decadent themes" (97), this is not what characterises James' depiction of Maisie. His construction of the child figure as monstrous is not a

reaction against a tradition of child-worship centred around the notion of an immortal child or eternal childhood which is tied uniquely to aestheticism, but, as I have mentioned previously, a reaction to a broader trend which characterises many accounts of children and depictions of childhood in literature throughout the century. He is a crucial part of this study, however, because his construction of the child is similar to those of Pater's, Lee's, and MacDonald's work: one significant example of which is the disruption of a "natural" temporal progression associated with childhood. James, by constructing Maisie as a static figure, and thus disrupting the *bildungsroman* journey which is so often attributed to the novel, creates a temporal disturbance not unlike Pater's, Lee's, or MacDonald's.

It is interesting that while in his contemporaries' texts this disruption is achieved through the intrusion of death which renders the child's path of development non-linear, James's approach is to strip the experience of childhood itself from the death which is its inextricable companion. All childhood must pass away; children must die in becoming adults; Vernon Lee gives this inevitability a gruesome face in the image of the children's graves at the site of their playground haunts in "Limbo". With *Maisie*, James denies this culmination, and he does so through the exerted agency of the child figure herself, who chooses that her child-self will not die. Different though each author's approach to the subject may be, all result in a denial or reconstruction of death; James' is no different. Maisie's developmental stasis is intrinsically connected to her refusal to submit to the inevitable death of her childhood. Where James' novel departs from texts by MacDonald, Lee, or Pater, is in his identification of such constructions as disturbing, even monstrous. These links between the authors are not predicated on their relationship to the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement, but in their construction of un-dead child figures or the child in relation to non-death.

Temporal disruption or atemporality is quite a common feature in conceptions of childhood in literature, and one not limited to the nineteenth century. In fact, the child figures explored in this study are, in many ways, not unique either in the nineteenth century or since then. Honeyman refers to the tendency of adult authors to invest in the child figure “an impossible escape from discursive power in all its dependence and insistence upon linear, analytical, and paradigmatic thought” (6), emphasising the specific desire “to escape dependence upon linear thought and language” (17). The child figure is thus often constructed as an escape from linearity, and Pater, Lee, MacDonald, and James, as I have mentioned above, retain this element in their child figures. Similarly, as Honeyman analyses “the ‘empty spaces’ created for hypothetical children in discourse” (17), and considers “childhood itself represented as space” (17), she makes clear the fact that a construction of child-worlds and fantastic realms which embody the qualities of an essential childhood is in no way unique to Pater or Lee or MacDonald. Nor is the construction of the child as extra-linguistic, which is a central characteristic of both Lee’s and MacDonald’s child figures; Honeyman also identifies the construction of childhood as “relatively preverbal, outside empowered discourse” (4) as typical.

Even the enigma of the child-mind which is so crucial a part of James’ and MacDonald’s notion of child figures and the childlike has been spoken of in great depth by Honeyman, who refers to the child’s “remote unknowability” (142) in her attempt to politicise the exclusion of children’s voices from empowered discourse. The same idea forms the basis on which Shuttleworth’s study is founded, offering a complex and informative analysis of historical attempts to conceptualise and understand childhood as a state of being. The association between the child figure and immortality is also one which has already been well-established: as mentioned above, Plotz’s reading of the construction of child-death as presence rather than

absence relies heavily on modes of transformation – into the landscape, or into art – or on narratives of the immortal child. Yet, as I stated earlier in reference to Plotz’s discussion of immortal children in nineteenth-century literary accounts of child deaths, what I am interested in achieving with this study is an expansion in the way in which critical discussion approaches the imposing puzzle posed by the extensive array of literary representations of the child, and of death, and crucially of those moments in which the two entwine. Just as each representation of the child figure itself can be read as bearing its own connotations and anxieties, not all instances in which child figures intersect with death must be read according to a fixed notion of child death. Sometimes the dead child is more than a failure, and its individual immortality is not the focus of attention: what if critical emphasis directed at the impact that the child has on death, rather than on the child that has died?

It should be noted that I am not looking to engage directly with conversations regarding the erotics of child death which have been considered by Kincaid as well as Kevin Ohi, who looks explicitly at the role of death in Pater’s construction of an erotic child figure in *Innocence and Rapture: The Erotic Child in Pater, Wilde, James, and Nabokov* (2005). Since Kincaid’s *Child-loving*, it has become difficult to speak of the child figure in literature written in the latter half of the nineteenth century without speaking also of the desire which is inherently embedded in the construction of the child figure as innocent, as Other, as the object of a particular “nostalgia for one’s own child-being” (Kincaid 228). Further compounding this element of desire, at least in relation to this study, is the eroticism which permeates our conception of death itself to an extent that popular euphemisms for each are often essentially interchangeable. Even Kincaid, although he emphasises that “few pedophiles actually want [the death of the child], though perhaps something on the road to death would do, something *dying*” (234), cannot deny “a strain of pedophilia

that longs for the expiring child” (235). Yet, as Caroline Steedman notes in *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (1995), “a static and atemporal ‘field of desire’ cannot tell us very much about *what* was being invested in this image, body or being, nor why that investment might have been made” (8).

While Kincaid’s markers of an erotically charged relationship between the child figure and death are undoubtedly present in the texts which comprise the focus of this study – Pater’s in particular – those very markers are bound up in a traditional understanding of death itself as naturally finite; however, not only do the texts considered here not support such a conception of death, they seek to complicate, if not replace, that very concept. Thus, when Ohi refers to “Pater’s love of death – closely tied in his writing to the erotic child” in which “an aesthetic sense is all but synonymous with an identification with the dead, with identity’s vanishing” (14), he is referring also to death as a loss, as a vanishing, which, in “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart” at least, is overtly considered and rejected in favour of a cyclical return. Ohi reads the “continuity of memory that enables the impossible intuition of how desolate one will have been – which rephrases, within a ‘single’ consciousness, the sympathetic identification between old and young” (18) in Pater’s unfinished novel, *Gaston de Latour*; as a paradox in relation to the text’s evocation of “the forgetting of oneself by others after one’s death” (18). Yet this same fusion between old and young voices, one which characterises both “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart”, is indicative of an up-ending of the very construct of death on which Ohi’s erotics of loss is predicated. This is not to say that such communications of non-death are devoid of eroticism or desire; far from it. However, in reconsidering the linear finality of the act of dying, such texts surely complicate the model on which readings of an erotics of death, if not necessarily of the child

figure, are built.

The post-mortem child photography with which I opened is itself a perfect example of a complication of the erotics of death as well as photographs and images of children, and it is precisely this kind of complication that underpins the focus of this discussion. This involves more than simply looking at the child figure in relation to death, although that is the topic at the heart of this analysis, it means also considering the child's presence beyond the child-character. The child figure in this sense also encompasses those adult characters who are constructed as children, as well as the spaces constructed around children, and those which are imbued with conceptions of a child 'spirit' or 'essence'. What is revealed suggests that in addition to the prevalence of child-death as it was traditionally depicted in literature, there were authors who appropriated the unlimited potential of the child figure in order to transform a subject which is quite literally as inexorable as death.

“Even children do sometimes die”:

Walter Pater’s Immortal Child

“Therewith came, full-grown, never fully to leave him... the certainty that even children do sometimes die”⁴

The child figure haunts Walter Pater’s works, both fictional and critical; it emerges irrepressibly as a central theme in much of his fiction, and images of the child still characterise those essays and portraits of which it is not the primary focus. Frequently, the child becomes a locus for the intersection of seemingly incongruous states – motion and stasis, past and present, ending and beginning – while in most instances the presence of the child figure is closely associated with death. Two of Pater’s fictional narratives in particular, “The Child in the House” (1878) and “Emerald Uthwart,” (1892) focus on the child as a site for this intersection and association. Where memory and time exist in a linear sense in the adult mind, Pater constructs the experience of both in childhood as multiple and/or simultaneous, as the child’s linear development is fragmented, and memory becomes an experience which is both remembered and new. Through such constructions, the understanding

⁴ Walter Pater. “The Child in the House” (164).

of death as an end is questioned, as Pater explores the possibility of reaching beyond death, constructing it as a return to childhood instead. It should be noted that when I speak of Pater's attempt to reach beyond death, it is not in a sense akin to MacDonald's, of a life which exists in a physical and conceptual space beyond the event of death. Instead, I refer to an attempt to move beyond the notion of death itself, to step outside of a vision of death which is constrained by linear finality.

The child figure has not been overlooked in academic interpretations of Pater's fiction. Kevin Ohi's *Innocence and Rapture* offers perhaps the most comprehensive account of the relationship between the erotic child and death in Pater's fiction, while John Coates suggests that Pater turns to the child figure to explain the nature of an aesthetic education. Denis Donoghue describes how, for Pater, the child offers a way of 'seeing inwardly,' of reconsidering notions of beauty (183), and John Rosenberg briefly yet inconclusively identifies the association between the dead child figure and the 'perfection of pure being' (196). However, none have yet discussed the significance of those key narrative and temporal disruptions which coincide with his depiction of the child, child death, and the child's perceptions of death. Some studies of the nature and significance of the Victorians' interest in, even obsession with, the child figure offer potential insight into these gaps in criticism surrounding the Paterian child: most notable are Kincaid's *Child-loving*, with its thorough consideration of the importance of the child in Victorian culture, and *The Mind of the Child*, Shuttleworth's exploration of literary and medical studies of the child mind in the nineteenth century.

With these approaches in mind, and focusing on "The Child in the House" and "Emerald Uthwart," this chapter will consider the Paterian child figure as it engages with the Platonic model of love and Freudian theories of loss and trauma, two theories that reveal the unique association between death and the child which

Pater crafts in order to re-configure the concept of death as a finite end. Both “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart” rely on a particular concept of the child and the way in which the child’s mind lingers within the adult’s; this multifarious selfhood, a Platonic inheritance, is primarily outlined through Pater’s interpretation of classical Greek literature and philosophy in his collections of essays, particularly *Plato and Platonism* and *Greek Studies*.

The dialectic process that Pater describes in “The Doctrine of Plato” offers some crucial insight into his perception of the child. Pater discusses the nature of a “dialogue of the mind” as the basis for what takes place in conversational or written dialogues and “lends its name to the method it figures - ‘dialectic’” (183). In this description he outlines the characterisation of the various selves who participate “in that long and complex dialogue of the mind with itself,” and points out that,

The *advocates diaboli* will be heard from time to time. The dog also, or, as the Greeks said, the wolf, will out with his story against the man; and one of the interlocutors will always be a child, turning round upon us innocently, candidly, with our own admissions, or surprising us, perhaps at the last moment, by what seems his invincible ignorance, when we thought it rooted out of him. There will be a youth, inexperienced in the capacities of language, who will compel us to allow much time to the discussion of words and phrases, though not always unprofitably. (183-4)

For Pater, the role of the child within the self is a means of achieving greater knowledge; we learn through our attempts to root out the ‘invincible ignorance’ of our inner child. Furthermore, the child-self and youth-self serve the crucial purpose of “refreshing... with his enthusiasm, the weary or disheartened enquirer (who is always also of the company)” (184). The distinction between youth and child is typically a vague one, and variable, with the former usually used to describe adolescence. Yet both are defined by their distance from the adult state, a common characteristic which Frank Musgrove, in “Inventing the Adolescent”, identifies as a part of the very creation of adolescence in the nineteenth century, noting that “areas of experience and knowledge were now designated ‘adult’, from which the less-than-

adult must be shielded” (85). The similarities between the two categories of childhood are carried through Pater’s description of the youth-self as “the rightly sanguine youth, ingenuous and docile, to whom, surely, those friendly living ideas will be willing, longing, to come, after that Platonic law of affinity, so effectual in these matters” (Pater, “Doctrine” 184). The child also keeps the enthusiasm for intellectualism alive, through a welcoming of those “friendly living ideas.”

This intersection of selfhood creates a comparable immortality within the self in which the child, or an element of the child, is not lost. Pater does not address the idea of this dialectic within the child’s own mind, but it is clear that the child is carried within the self, incapable of being dismissed. It is interesting that this construction of an eternal child-self should exist amongst a collection of selves within what we can only assume is an adult identity; unlike Lee, MacDonald, and even James, Pater’s description would seem to stand in opposition to a construction of the child’s consciousness as a fantastic and unfathomable space. Instead it is enveloped by the adult mind, its unique characteristics readily accessible. This may be a reaction to an anxiety that Shuttleworth describes as characteristic of nineteenth-century studies of child development, one which was “central to the middle class will to control, which repeatedly found itself baffled by the forbidden, indecipherable inner world of the child” (65-6). Or it may be indicative of an attempt to mediate between the reality of the child’s unknowable state of being and adult constructions of children and childhood, such as Susan Honeyman points out in *Elusive Childhood*. However neither understanding seems to suit the fusion/confusion of adult- and child figures in Pater’s texts which I shall explore later on; the Paterian child seems instead to be related to an entanglement of the two. In outlining a selfhood that is defined in part by a retained child-self, Pater is already alluding to the importance of the return to the state of childhood which will characterise both “The Child in the House” and

“Emerald Uthwart”.

In addition, the fact that this description of the immortal child-self in the dialectic process is outlined in *Plato and Platonism* is significant, as it evokes Plato’s theory of love outlined in the *Symposium*. Although Pater does not devote an essay to the discussion of Platonic love in *Plato and Platonism*, references to the theory emerge periodically throughout the text.⁵ The basis from which Plato builds his theory of love is the inherent desire of humanity for immortality, to defy the certainty of death as an end to everything: “We needs must yearn for immortality no less than for good, since love loves good to be one’s own for ever. And hence it necessarily follows that love is of immortality... The mortal nature ever seeks, as best it can, to be immortal” (Plato 207a-d). Plato identifies two means of achieving this immortality: children and art, specifically writing and the immortality of ideas (207d-209c). For Plato, art and ideas represent the only way of truly maintaining one’s influence after death and thus achieving immortality, while biological reproduction offers a lesser, transitory, almost substitutive means. While Pater also embraces and explores the desire to defy death, he does not make such a decisive division between the child and art: for Pater, it is through the child *within* art that death can be reconfigured. Like Plato, Pater uses art as a means of exploring the desire for immortality which cannot be actualised in reality; yet he also focuses on the child, specifically on a child marked with the values of aestheticism, as embodying the potential to realise those desires.

The depiction of the enduring child-self in *Plato and Platonism* suggests Pater’s perception of childhood as a state which lingers in the adult mind, suggesting

⁵ Pater refers to Plato’s “kindled and enkindling words on love and friendship in the *Symposium*” in “Plato and the Sophists” (120) and quotes Diotima’s speech at length (121-2), but does not discuss the speech itself. In “The Doctrine of Plato”, Pater mentions the “lover of the Ideas – attracted, corrected, guided, rewarded, satiated, in a long discipline, that ‘ascent of the soul into the intelligible world,’ of which the ways of earthly love are a true parallel” (172), and briefly discusses “the second stage of Plato’s speculative ascent.... the love of intellectual and strictly invisible things” (170).

that it is also a state which can be returned to, as a means of realising immortality; from this theory, his exploration of the child figure as a possible means of either deferring or redefining death becomes more understandable. Consider the essay “Demeter and Persephone”: in relating the tale of Demeter assuming the disguise of a human nurse in order to foster the human child Demophoon and secure the infant’s immortality, Pater’s phrasing echoes a theme that permeates his own works: “The whole episode of the fostering of Demophoon, in which over the body of the dying child human longing and regret are blent so subtly with the mysterious design of the goddess to make the child immortal, is an excellent example of the sentiment of pity in literature” (*Greek Studies* 114). The dying child, the death of the child, is directly connected with the potential for delaying or surpassing death. The blending of “human longing and regret” – terms which suggest both anticipation and memory – with the design (and desire) to make the child immortal characterises Pater’s narrative in “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart.” Perhaps that is why he identifies with that same desire to such a great degree in the myths of Demeter and Persephone.

Of course, although Pater’s conceptualisation of the child figure within his texts is deeply influenced by his Hellenism, it is also equally defined by his own cultural context; Sally Shuttleworth notes a “centrality of engagement with understanding the child mind at the end of the century” (268), a cultural fascination from which Pater’s own interest in the child suggests he was certainly not exempt. In fact, many of the qualities with which Pater imbues his child figures seem to be echoed in Shuttleworth’s description of Alexander Chamberlain’s *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man* (1900), in which, she notes,

With its potentiality waiting to be unfurled, the child becomes... an embodiment both of all past history and an expression of future possibility. The highly Romanticized conception emphasizes the role of play and childhood imagination, while the ‘brutish’ elements

which the child is also deemed to express are rhetorically glossed over and allied with the divine in this teleological vision of an evolutionary sweep towards perfection. In the yearning nostalgia of the image, the child becomes the key to self understanding, to a return of a lost past, and also the guarantee of a more positive future.

(267)

Yet there are some key points on which Pater's depiction of children and childhood differs from Chamberlain's. Chamberlain's child figure, like many others in the literary and medical representations from the *fin de siècle* that Shuttleworth analyses, stands as both "atavism and prophecy", contributes to a construction of childhood that is, by this period, increasingly concerned with evolutionary theories. Yet primitivism is absent from Pater's child characters, or from his references to childhood in critical essays.

Similarly missing is any significant description of play, a lack which is replicated by Lee, MacDonald, and even James, although whether it is a conscious omission on the part of each is not entirely clear. If it makes any appearance at all, child's play is relegated quite firmly to the sidelines: the childhood imagination outlined in "The Child in the House" and "Emerald Uthwart" is that of aesthetic impression. Finally, although the Paterian child is very clearly connected to the importance of a return, it is not the "return of a lost past", but rather a return to a past which has not been lost. Nor is Pater's return indicative of a positive future in the sense of Chamberlain's greater self-development. Perhaps the difference lies in the objective: "The Child in the House", although it is a literary autobiography which certainly explores questions about the child's "first memories of sensations, the emergence of a sense of selfhood... and the origins of fear" (Shuttleworth 303), does not necessarily constitute an attempt to understand the child mind itself.

"The Child in the House" stands in contrast to Shuttleworth's suggestion that "the autobiographies tended to adopt a more complex view of the factors which could influence the development of the child mind. The literary child does not move

from sensation to selfhood in a seeming vacuum but is subject to intense pressures from its familial and social environment” (303). In “The Child in the House” at least, the influence of the Child’s familial and social environment does not come across as an intense pressure; in fact, the pressure to which the narrator refers directly is “the pressure upon [the Child] of the sensible world”. The bulk of the narrative is devoted to describing the association between the impressions of sensation and the development of selfhood, as the text constructs what Ohi refers to as “a startlingly perverse aesthetic education” (51). In this education the Child “yield[s] himself” to the startling impressions of sensations or passions, “to be played upon by them like a musical instrument” (Pater, “Child” 161), while they inspire in him the “curious reflexions” (162) which form the crux of his self-development. Although the text attempts to paint child consciousness (Ohi 53), and is deeply influenced by common interests in or anxieties regarding the perplexing question posed by the child figure in the *fin de siècle*, neither “The Child in the House” nor “Emerald Uthwart” construct child figures with any significant interest in attaining or depicting a clearer understanding of the child mind. Instead, Pater’s interest in the child figure as a catalyst, as engaged with conceptions of death and ideas of immortality, is more important for these two portraits than an exploration of the child mind.

i. Paterian Memory and “The Child in the House”

While Pater’s desire to achieve a sense of immortality by means of the child figure is explored through the distant observation of the main character in “Emerald Uthwart”, in “The Child in the House” it manifests in the interaction of the three main characters – Florian Deleal, the Narrator, and the Child – as well as in the Child’s own understanding of death. As “The Child in the House” opens, Florian Deleal, the initial primary character of the story, meets “by the wayside a poor aged

man” who – in telling Florian his story – happens to mention “the place... where Florian had passed his earliest years, but which he had never since seen” (147). From this meeting, related by what first appears to be a third-person narrator, Florian lapses into a reminiscence of his childhood home. At this point, the identity of the narrator becomes confused, conflated with his own perspective yet always maintaining a distanced point of view. The story of Florian’s child-self is occasionally replaced by interwoven references to “the Child”, yet the nature of the relationship between the two is never clearly resolved. The text unfolds as a series of descriptive memories detailing a child’s emotional maturation and aesthetic education before his final departure into “the rural distance”, leaving both house and childhood behind.

There are several interpretations of the relationship between Florian, the Child, and the Narrator in “The Child in the House”. For many, reading the text relies heavily on this interpretation: whether the Child is Florian’s recollection of his childhood self or whether the Child becomes a separate representation of someone else’s childhood, particularly the narrator’s. Ohi’s discussion of “The Child in the House” in *Innocence and Rapture* suggests an ambiguous relationship between the three figures, one in which it is “impossible to assume the convergence of remembering artist and the remembered boy,” introducing a “gap” between the two (51).⁶ For Ohi, the importance of this relationship does not depend upon a clear understanding of the Child as the childhood memory of either Florian or the Narrator, and to some extent the same is true for my analysis. Pater’s Narrator in this text is in some ways evocative of James’s narrator in *What Maisie Knew*, the confusion of

⁶ In his analysis of “The Child in the House”, Ohi describes the paradoxes that exist in the representation of the relationships between the three characters: “These paradoxes... threaten the coherence of the identity that would be established by this narrative: emphasized in this circular return is the older Florian’s alienation from his younger self, a disjunction or displacement highlighted in the reiterated way of naming the younger Florian: ‘The child of whom I am writing’” (53).

identities in “The Child in the House” constructs a narrator whose role as an active character within the text is, in that respect, similar to the narrator in James’s novel, as I discuss in chapter four.

However, the two differ drastically when it comes to the significance of the narrator’s relationship to the wider cast of characters: while this connection constitutes an essential part of how one reads *Maisie* (and, indeed, most if not all of James’s texts), quite what the nature of the Narrator’s engagement with the text’s central characters is carries much less weight in “The Child in the House”. Although the three are set up as separate entities, Florian, the Child, and the Narrator become so entwined as the text progresses that it is difficult to tell at which points their respective experiences diverge. However, as the narrative progresses it becomes, whether consciously or not, an exploration of the enduring impact of the child on the adult self, and of the role that the child plays in memory and the reinterpretation of death. Echoing his description of the child in the dialogue of the mind from *Plato and Platonism*, Pater outlines the way in which “the sensible things which are tossed and fall and lie about us, so, or so, in the environment of early childhood” are not merely lost in childhood and relegated to memory (“Child” 151), but go further, and “figure themselves on the white paper, the smooth wax of our ingenious souls... giving form and feature, and as it were assigned house-room in our memory, to early experiences of feeling and thought, which abide with thus ever afterwards, thus, and not otherwise” (152). Here, as in *Plato and Platonism*, the notion of the immortal child-self within the adult-self is put forth, tied to the importance of memory, and to Pater’s perception of what memory is.

“The Child in the House” is written as a recollection; it begins with the aged man who spurs Florian’s thoughts and dreams to turn to the past, specifically to the experiences of the mysterious child. However, memory in this instance is not a

simple reminiscence; the description of the dream in which his childhood home comes to Florian identifies the memory as “the finer sort of memory, bringing its object to mind with a great clearness... above ordinary retrospect” (Pater, 147). As the story progresses, it is as if the past is recurring, rather than being recollected; certainly the somnolent state in which these memories first occur could account for that impression. However, as Florian awakes the dream quickly fades, leaving in its wake a narrative shift from third-person to first-person, as well as the introduction of the unnamed Child figure. Out of the dream emerges a depiction of memory would anticipate the intense act of remembering that Sigmund Freud attributed to patients of neuroses who are “obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (Freud, *Beyond* 12). Yet for Pater a memory which allows for a return to the past moment is not pathological, as Freud sees it. It is, in fact, quite the opposite: Pater uses this sense of a repeated experience to enhance the experience of recollection itself.

This approach to remembrance in Pater’s texts has not gone unnoticed: Wolfgang Iser describes memory in Pater as “imaginative,” and, in an aesthetic attitude, crucial to the individual’s creation of life and his ability to “satisfy his longing to create and live with perfection” (Iser 83). This enhancing or transfiguring memory is also identified by Denis Donoghue, who points out that “the purpose of memory in [Pater’s] fiction is not to recall an old experience but to create a new one” (182). For Iser and Donoghue, the past is recurring, not as a reflection of memory, but as an enhanced and new re-vision of what has been. Yet in “The Child in the House”, at least, memory is not so much the recurrence or the return *of* the past as a return *to* it: Florian finds himself once more in “the old house”, but this time he is able to “divide the main streams at least of the winds that had played on him and

study so the first stage in that mental journey” (147). The events, sensations, and experiences that are expressed as recollections become the present for the Narrator, Florian, and the reader, and are acknowledged as the past even as they are constructed as a new present. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as with death and the desire for immortality, Pater’s construction of memory is also connected to the child figure, a relationship which calls to mind Kincaid’s description of the relationship between paedophilia and “a desire to return, to be the child” (228). Kincaid describes how “memory [that] will hold the child, allow its sexuality to be re-presented over and over...Through these erotic plays of memory we also reach back to an uncanny union with childhood, a sense that we are, in the very process of remembering, acting as children” (229-230). Certainly Pater’s construction of memory, as indeed of his child figures themselves, carries with it strong overtones of the anxieties and desires that Kincaid outlines as an inherent part of paedophilic child-loving – for example, Kincaid’s description of the rationale that “if one can make the experience intense enough, perhaps it will make it stay, contain both time and the child” (227) is reminiscent of Pater’s enhanced memory, and of his interest in an eternal childhood.

Yet Pater’s remembrance is not the “remembering erotically” that Kincaid describes, and his interest is in a retained, rather than contained, child figure. While the latter is inherently static, the former – for Pater at least – opens itself to the movement of the return, an intersection of stasis and motion which Pater evokes emphatically in “Emerald Uthwart”, as we shall later see. Memories of childhood allow for a return to the perception of life that is specific to the child: the influence of the senses, the freedom from limitations which develop as one grows into adulthood. And this return is inherently linked to death, even facilitated by it. For Florian, the act of becoming “child-like” is associated with his child-self’s growing understanding of mortality, while the return to childhood eventually takes on a

slightly more literal aspect through the allusion to his death as an event which has, yet has not taken place – another idea which Pater explores in greater detail in “Emerald Uthwart.” Florian is constructed as one of the *revenants*, or ghosts, that haunt his childhood self, and as such is allowed a kind of resurrection and rebirth through the re-casting of death itself as a non-, or perhaps I should say an un-ending. In “The Child in the House” in particular, Pater makes use of the child’s understanding of death and its formative effect in an aesthetic education to explore the ways in which the adult’s logical perception of death as essentially finite can be overcome and redefined.

Death characterises a great deal of the events in “The Child in the House”, and much of the text is devoted to the child’s understanding and experience of death. Indeed, death plays such a crucial part within the text that Ohi describes “The Child in the House” as “a narrative of artistic development that focuses centrally on an eroticized gaze at childhood and death” (51). And “The Child in the House” is not unique in this respect; Gerald Monsman points out that death plays a key role in nearly all of Pater’s portraits, and associates the cycle of life and death with Pater’s “nostalgia for the ‘half-ideal’ world of childhood” (49). Yet Pater’s portraits do not demonstrate the same tendency, as Pattison says of Dickens, to construct children whose “innocence, like the innocence and beauty of nature, is somehow fatal... possessed of every virtue, pure beyond the sympathies of modern audiences” (80). This attitude is somewhat more indicative of MacDonald’s fantasy fiction, in which children and death play an even more explicit role. Nor does Pater seem to support the assertion made by Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds that “children who die are problematic because they can signify only failure... of the child to achieve the mixture of goals and possessions which amount to a lifestyle” (8). Although “The Child in the House” does address the death of the child directly, the focus is on the

entwining of the child figure *with* death, and even this idea departs from traditional approaches. Pater's aim is to explore the child's own impressions of death, and in that effort his portraits stand more in line with James's child figures than with MacDonald's or even Lee's.

Although Ohi suggests that "The Child in the House" story figures death as "all but synonymous with comprehending childhood" (55), the child figure's relation to death is more than simply an anticipation or comprehension: it is a return. The Child recalls "in unfading minutest circumstance, the cry on the stair, sounding bitterly through the house, and struck into his soul for ever, of an aged woman, his father's sister, come now to announce his death in distant India; how it seemed to make the aged woman like a child to him" (Pater, "Child" 156-7). Death is here associated with a return to a child-like state; in this passage, the experience of grieving for one who has been lost enables a partial return to childhood, but only partial. Ohi points out a distinction in Pater's description of grief's ability to make someone 'like a child again' between "the child and the child-like, home and home-like, as between the child and the home he 'resembles'" (55). In grieving the dead, one merely returns to a child-like state, to a state that exists in the gap between the child and the adult, between childhood and the desire, yet ultimate inability to return to childhood. Yet the passage alludes to the bond between an encounter with death and the return to a state of childhood; elsewhere the text suggests that only through death itself can one fully return to childhood.

Although the grieving individual is only transformed into the child-like figure, death is still given the ability to isolate and draw out the immortal child-within-the-self. Many critics⁷ have focused on the way in which death adds lustre to

⁷ Some of the most influential approaches include Ohi's "Doomed Creatures of Immature Radiance": Renaissance, Death, and Rapture in Walter Pater" in *Innocence and Rapture* (13-14, 35-44, 50-60), as well as Donoghue's *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (182-186); and Rosenberg's *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature* (189-190, 196).

beauty in Pater's works, and others have noted his erotic fascination with death; however, few have considered the way that death interrupts or restructures the linear progression of time in many Paterian texts. Pater uses mortality to subvert the finite construction of life by constructing death as cyclical, associating the act of dying with a return to childhood, a beginning which is both remembered and new. This association then creates a temporality in which a linear progression of life from child to adult to death is disrupted, both by the resurgence of childhood through memory and by the return to childhood through our experiences with death. Pater's deliberate construction of both memory and death as means of returning to childhood allows him to confuse a linearly progressing temporality in his fiction.

Having refused to follow this linear temporality, "The Child in the House" and "Emerald Uthwart" are not bound to a conception of death as the end to this progression. Thus, Donoghue's description of the house itself in "The Child in the House" as "a child wise enough to know that dying is in the nature of things and the best one can hope for is to stay childlike about it" (186) alludes to, but does not clearly identify exactly what staying childlike about death means. The text closes with the child's last minute return to his now-empty house in search of a pet bird that had been left behind, passing through it "from room to room, lying so pale" (Pater, "Child" 169). Rather than merely encouraging a childlike optimism in the face of mortality, Pater's description of the house as "like the face of one dead" and the child's sudden feeling of "clinging back towards it" (169) subverts the traditional construction of mortality itself by laying the foundation for Florian's inevitable return to the space, and with it the state of childhood, in death. By closing with the image of the house as corpse – a corpse which is and yet is not dead – Pater emphasises a non-death that is entwined with the return of the child, further reinforcing a notion of death itself that is not an end as we might conceive it.

“The Child in the House” discusses a child’s understanding of death in a backwards way, beginning with a description of the death of a father which is not explored until much later, and emphasising an acceptance of death prior to describing the moment in which the Child is confronted with the concept. The Child thinks of “Cecil, early dead, as cut off from the lilies, from golden summer days, from women’s voices” (161) long before he is confronted by the “certainty that even children do sometimes die”; interestingly, the Child seeks solace in “the thought of the turning of the child’s flesh to violets in the turf above him” (161). This image offers the dead child an extension of life through repetition: the dead child’s flesh turns to violets that are then re-born every spring. Death is thus not an ending for Cecil; he is allowed to endure through the cyclical life of a perennial violet. Judith Plotz explores such imagery as part of a mode of transformation through which the dead child “is assimilated to some other being or state. The child may blend into nature as an object or a *genus loci*, she may go away to become a ghost, or she may merge into or become associated with a living alter ego” (8). Each of these elements of transformation, it could be argued, can be found in “The Child in the House”, as well as in “Emerald Uthwart”, as I shall explore later in this chapter. Even further, Pater’s conflation of the immortality of the child with the immortality of art, discussed previously, evokes Plotz’s third type of transformation, “that of the childhood death into art. In the mode of art, a lost being is retrievable as aesthetic artefact” (11). Yet Pater’s focus is not on the transformation of child death into aesthetic artefact, but on the child’s aesthetic impressions. Similarly, the image of the dead child’s absorption into the landscape, into the violets, does not suggest an attempt to replace the absence of the child with a presence, or even to construct the notion of an immortal child, as Plotz’s transformations describe. Cecil is already dead, lacking substance as a character and existing only in the context of “the turning

of the child's flesh to violets"; the fact that the focus is on the process of cyclical rebirth itself, and not on the reconstituted child indicates that the significance is invested more in the transformation of death itself, rather than the dead child.

The theme of rebirth, and the emphasis on repetition, is common in Pater's fiction, Ohi even going so far as to suggest that "resurrection, rebirth, and repetition are hallmarks of Pater's Hegelian model of history" (43). It is worth noting that these themes bear a striking resemblance to later Freudian theories – specifically in "Mourning and Melancholia" – of the use of repetition to resurrect that which has been lost in order to work through the mourning process. That said, unlike George MacDonald's almost compulsive interest in cyclical repetition which engages with traumatic loss, Pater's palingenetic imagery is an expression of his interest in reaching beyond death, not confronting loss.

It is interesting to note that the palingenetic imagery in "The Child in the House" – which indicates a mature, and inherently Paterian, acceptance and understanding of death – precedes not only the description of a pivotal moment in which the Child confronts the vision of death as an ending, but also two further descriptions of resurrection. As the narrative moves from a description of the dead children to the death of adults, particularly the Child's father, it is accompanied by a marked change in the Child's perception of death. The narrator describes how "the child had heard indeed of the death of his father, and how, in the Indian station, a fever had taken him, so that though not in action he had yet died as a soldier; and hearing of the 'resurrection of the just,' he could think of him as still abroad in the world, somehow, for his protection" (Pater, "Child" 163). The resurrection of adults, who are – in the Child's mind – allowed a full continuation of life as it once was after death, seems to be a fairly concrete image of immortality, particularly when compared to the rebirth imagery afforded to children earlier in the text: while the

child can only live through flowers, the adult is allowed full resurrection of the self.

However, when the narrative goes on to reveal the Child's discovery of a child's grave, and the subsequent arrival, "full-grown, never wholly to leave him, with the certainty that even children do sometimes die, the physical horror of death," it becomes clear that the Child's fantasy of the resurrected adults, devoid of that physical horror of death, could only have been constructed before this epiphanic realisation (164). Yet the realisation that children do die must have come to him by the time he has formed the perception of death and immortality which accompanies the image of violets on Cecil's grave, as that passage deals specifically with the death of children. Thus, although the text presents the Child's encounter with the death of children first, the logical progression of his understanding of death indicates that this experience must have taken place after the Child's imagination of his father "still abroad in the world." The linear progression of the text, already tenuous given its basis both in dream and in memory, is in these instances visibly disrupted in the description of the Child's various encounters with mortality.

The Child's changing perception of death is confirmed by his later description of another kind of resurrection, which does not initially seem to suggest the same rebirth as the imagery that surrounded his memory of the dead child:

Sitting one day in the garden below an open window, he heard people talking... and from the broken talk evolved with much clearness the notion that not all those dead people had really departed to the churchyard, nor were quite so motionless as they looked, but led a secret, half-fugitive life in their old homes, quite free by night... Afterwards he came to think of those poor, home-returning ghosts, which all men have fancied to themselves – the *revenants* – pathetically, as crying, or beating with vain hands at the doors, as the wind came, their cries distinguishable in it as a wilder inner note.
(164)

Here, again, the dead are resurrected, but it is no longer the complete resurrection which the Child imagined prior to discovering the child's grave; instead, the dead lead a "secret, half-fugitive life." These ghostly adult figures are referred to by the

Child specifically as *revenants*. The term carries a much stronger association with the return of the self than the term *ghost*, suggesting more of a manifestation, an echo of the self. As Ohi points out, the term “‘revenant’ conveys, better than ghost or spirit, a (perhaps unwelcome or unwished for) return; the *revenant* seems less to haunt the present than to be out of step with history, to be stranded in a time foreign to it” (39).

Both Ohi and Donoghue identify revenants as carrying a distinctly different meaning in Pater’s works than is traditionally associated with ghosts. Donoghue describes them as beings which, “having lived in ordinary social worlds, now express themselves as a force of nature... They have returned not only to the places they have lived in but to the natural world from which they first came” (186). Ohi’s description of the revenant as being “out of step with history... stranded in a time foreign to it,” is particularly interesting (39). He goes on to describe the role of the revenant in “The Child in the House,” noting that it “makes of [the older Florian] one of what the story later calls ‘poor, home-returning ghosts... *revenants*’” (Ohi 53). However, I would question the way in which Ohi interprets the nature of the revenant in the text. His reading evokes elements of the revenant as it is featured in folklore, what David Buchan and Edward Ives describes as “a corporeal creature, a substantial person acting like a human being because he or she is to all appearances a human being, though one returned from the Otherworld” (145), often in order to haunt or “visit” a loved one (146). If Florian has been made a revenant in the text as Ohi suggests, which I think he has, he stands as a deliberate reversal of the traditional conception of these ghostly figures, not a representation of it.

It is interesting that Pater specifically chose the term *revenant* to depict his ghostly figures, given that the term has a somewhat more complicated history than the more traditional term “ghost”. In “Living in Death: The Evolution of Modern Vampirism”, Cheryl Atwater traces the development of revenants from folkloric

depictions of “a rotting corpse without will or distraction” to the eventual nineteenth century construction of the vampire, the “tall, gaunt figure of aristocratic nature” (75). Both Atwater and Buchan and Ives’ descriptions suggest that the revenant is a creature who, having returned from the dead, exist in a space and time in which they do not belong, a construction that tallies with Ohi’s notion of the revenant. Yet neither description seems to characterise Pater’s revenants. Although “The Child in the House” does not refer to Florian as a revenant directly, the text’s description of Florian’s return to his childhood home is constructed according to its description of the “poor, home-returning ghosts” (164) sets up a parallel between the remembering Florian and the Child’s revenants. And while he is certainly capitalising on the revenant’s place out of step with history, stranded in a foreign time, two significant ways in which Florian as revenant differs from the traditional concept suggest that Pater is appropriating the relatively vague definition of the word in order to construct an entirely new figure.

Florian is not trapped as Ohi’s use of the word “stranded” would suggest. Nor is he placed within a “time foreign to [him]”. He is “out of step with history”, yes, specifically his own historical time-line, yet the time in which he finds himself is anything but foreign: being a return to his own past, it is in fact deeply familiar. Florian’s position as a revenant, then, is again structured according to Pater’s obsession with returning, with re-beginning; it is also, of course, indicative of the importance of death to these ideas. For as a revenant, Florian must be considered dead. However, the death which makes of Florian a revenant has not actually taken place; he becomes a revenant through his return to childhood via Paterian memory. Perhaps we have here the same elision of death with sleeping and dreams of which MacDonald was so fond; in either case, by constructing Florian as a revenant the text both associates memory directly with death, and creates the image of a death which

is a non-ending. Not having, so far as we are aware from the text, died physically, Florian's death is non-finite, a temporary state that is fused with the act of remembrance, and which, crucially, allows him the ability to return to the experiences and impressions of his child-self. The use of the term revenant to describe the child's perception of the adults' resurrection suggests that their deaths, too, have been non-endings.

It is interesting that Pater's images of immortality in "The Child in the House" consist of flowers and revenants; while the former – alluded to already by the central character's name, Florian (Monsman 47) – are characteristic of what Monsman calls the "world of flowers which scatters such exquisite perfume through the whole of the portrait" (47), the revenants carry with them connotations of Gothic horror. Indeed, Florian's initial conception of the revenants is not entirely free from these associations, as he refers to "all those dead people" who, to return to a passage quoted earlier, "lead a secret, half-fugitive life in their old homes, quite free by night, though sometimes visible in the day, dodging from room to room, with no great goodwill towards those who shared the places with them. All the night the figure sat beside him in the reveries of his broken sleep, and was not quite gone in the morning" (Pater, "Child" 164). Yet despite these initially fearful impressions, Florian comes to "think of those poor, home-returning ghosts... pathetically, as crying, or beating with vain hands at the doors" (164-5); in the text's construction as in Florian's, the revenants are stripped of their Gothic robes, depicted with just a hint of the uncanny rather than its full horrific force. The return of the dead has always been a characteristic of horror – whether as vampires, ghosts, or the zombie-like revenants, it is a potentiality which taps into our deepest fears. The construction of Florian as revenant, however, is done in such a way as to seem not only natural, but enviable. The child here seems again capable of transforming death, in this instance

stripping the living dead of their innate terror while in their place constructing a ghostly return that has neutralised its unnatural elements. Whereas in a text like *What Maisie Knew* or *The Turn of the Screw*, James explores the potential of the child itself to be uncanny, unnatural, Pater puts forth a child figure with such power of purity that it transforms the ghastly into the beautiful.

Through his reference to and construction of revenants, then, Pater has fused childhood with death; more importantly, he has entwined them together in a way that allows a return from death to be simultaneously a return to childhood. In “The Child in the House,” Pater offers a series of endings which are not endings, but which are, eventually, a return to the child. Florian, as a revenant, alludes to a death which is not finite; similarly the final passages of the story – which suggest the end of childhood as the Child prepares to leave his home and anticipates some great journey beyond that formative space – create a non-ending as well. This occurs both literally (the Child’s return for the bird forces an almost immediate return to the house) and figuratively, as he departs with the notion that the final impressions of the house and his childhood existence there have left an indelible imprint. The specific phrasing, in fact, cements the intersection between death, the child figure, and the return: “as he passed... from room to room, lying so pale, with a look of meekness in their denudation, and at last through that little, stripped white room, the aspect of the place touched him like the face of one dead; and a clinging back towards it came over him, so intense that he knew it would last long” (168). I have already briefly referenced the image of the house-as-corpse with regards to Donoghue’s reading of it as a “child wise enough to know that dying is in the nature of things and the best one can hope for is to stay childlike about it” (186). However, the entwining of these three elements in the final image – the child figure, the dead house, and the desire to return – suggests that it carries a greater importance.

Monsman suggests that Florian “salvages from the dead past a single spark of life” (50), and sees in the image of the dead house an indication that “the expanding soul has grown beyond the bounds of the house, which suddenly has become a trap... in its death-like atmosphere” (50). Yet when considered in light of the repeated references to death as a non-finite event, and to death as a return, the experience foreshadows the adult Florian’s return with which the portrait begins. The presentiment created by the Child’s sense of a “clinging-back” to the corpse-house makes the text itself a cyclical one, depositing the reader once more at the beginning with an adult Florian who finds himself finally returning to “the old house”. Despite the Child’s final departure “far into the rural distance... of that favourite country-road” (Pater, “Child” 169), Florian’s return to childhood as a revenant is a testament to this cyclicity.

The Child’s departure from the old house also emphasises the significance of the space of the house itself to the child figure. The intensity with which the setting of “The Child in the House” is described is, in part, associated with Pater’s depiction of an aesthetic education – Florian reflects on owing “to the place many tones of sentiment afterwards customary with him, certain inward lights under which things most naturally presented themselves to him” (150). However, it is also essential to the construction of a return to the child figure in death. Childhood itself is described as “giving form and feature, and as it were assigned house-room in our memory, to early experiences of feeling and thought, which abide with us ever afterwards, thus, and not otherwise. The realities and passions, the rumours of the greater world without, steal in upon us, each by its own special little passage-way, through the wall of custom about us” (152). In so doing, Pater constructs a world around the child, a space to which the adult self will return in death. It is similar, perhaps, to Robert Louis Stevenson’s celebration of the child’s “world of ‘play’” which Shuttleworth

identifies in his essay “Child’s Play” (68), yet while Shuttleworth describes this separation of worlds as “a defamiliarizing twist” (68) for Pater there is no such defamiliarising effect. The world of the child is constructed as a site of nostalgic yearning, the intensity of which enables Florian to return to “the true aspect of the place... the fashion of its doors, its hearths, its windows, the very scent upon the air of it” (Pater, “Child” 147). The same is true of “Emerald Uthwart”, as we shall see, for although that text offers detailed descriptions of many sites which are steeped with significance for Emerald, it is his childhood home for which “in almost unbroken absence” he “longed greatly” (Pater “Uthwart” 172), and it is to this place that he returns “only to die... finding the sense of the place all around him at last, like blessed oil in one’s wounds” (172). Although Pater’s idea of the Platonic child-self describe an element of the child which lingers in the consciousness of the adult, the site of childhood itself, the childhood home, is described in its full glory. The state of childhood is thereby aligned with a space that is removed from the real world, and set “far into the rural distance” (Pater, “Child” 169).

ii. “Emerald Uthwart”’s Pre-emptive Mourning

Despite Florian’s position “a step out” of time and history, as a revenant, and the role that this construction plays in the disruption of a linear narrative, the narrative disruptions in “The Child in the House” pale in comparison to those in “Emerald Uthwart”, which places a much greater emphasis on the literal and metaphorical deferral of death, often through the disruption of memory. “Emerald Uthwart” tells the story of the said Emerald and his ordinary life as a young boy in the family home, who is sent away to school where he becomes interested in the classical masters, and develops a deep relationship with a peer, James Stokes, in the style of “the Greek or the Latin model of their antique friendship”. The two join the

Army, where, in pursuit of heroism and under Stokes' direction, both find themselves facing court martial. James is executed; Emerald, dismissed. After some time wandering alone and broken-hearted, Emerald returns to his childhood home, finally dying there of a neglected gunshot wound.

Although such a summary suggests a simple biography, the construction of the narrative is anything but. The text opens with the image of memorials, and a call to the reader to note "one in particular":

Loving parents and elder brother meant to record carefully the very days of the lad's poor life – *annos, menses, dies*; sent the order... but not quite explicitly; the spaces for the number remain still unfilled; and they never came to see. After two centuries the omission is not to be rectified; and the young man's memorial has perhaps its propriety as it stands, with those unnumbered, or numberless, days. (Pater, "Uthwart" 170-1)

Opening the narrative, Pater directs the reader's attention to a boy's death, recorded in a memorial that has been, due to error, left without a date of birth or death.

Through this error, the boy's life, though it has technically ended, is allowed to continue beyond his death, stretching on for countless days. It is with this image of a life beyond death – an image supported by the titular character's name, Emerald, which as Monsman points out has long been associated with ideas of immortality (176) – and with the intriguing statement that a young man's death that has and yet somehow has not occurred has its "propriety", that the narrator turns to the life of Emerald Uthwart.

And yet, Emerald's life story begins with his death, with a description of the gravestone that proclaims to all "that Emerald Uthwart was born on such a day, 'at Chase Lodge, in this parish; and died there'" (Pater, "Uthwart" 171). From the beginning of the text, then, Emerald is dead, but the narrative still delivers a thorough account of the events of his life from early childhood to the death with which it began. Both Shuter and Iser are quick to relate this 'arrested narrative' to a static text, one that contains no motion, no progression of the plot which might distract the

reader: “By presenting conclusions first, Pater prevents any tension as regards outcome, and instead directs his reader’s attention to the forces that resulted in that outcome. There is no linear time development... The narrative therefore remains static, for the interest lies not in any progress but in the basic forms of human life” (Iser 20).

I am not entirely convinced by Iser’s and Shuter’s description of “Emerald Uthwart” as a static text. The lack of any linear temporal development as a result of the story’s structure as an obituary does not necessarily negate the existence movement. I have already discussed the way that Pater deliberately disrupts linear progression in “The Child in the House” in order to create a movement which does not rely on the death of the central character as an inevitable end to the story; this same technique is employed in “Emerald Uthwart”, but to a greater extent. In the end, even Shuter comes to concede a kind of movement in “Emerald Uthwart,” noting that,

To the extent that the narrative of “Emerald Uthwart” represents movement, that movement will be recognised by such readers as Hegelian. It represents a progression from the unconscious state of nature in which man has not yet differentiated himself, through the architectural monuments that threaten to diminish him to ‘nothing at all,’ to the sculptural images that represent him in full consciousness of his humanity. (Shuter, “Arrested” 19-20).

Shuter’s description of the nature of movement in the narrative of “Emerald Uthwart” is astute in its recognition that the story does not embrace movement in the traditional sense of a progressive plot in which the story resolves tension to reach its conclusion; however, the movement in “Emerald Uthwart” can be read as more than simply Hegelian. The Hegelian motion to which Shuter refers – the progression through thesis and antithesis to synthesis – indicates a culmination in a particular pay-off which is lacking in Pater’s text. By establishing a narrative in which the primary movement is a repetitive and almost cyclical series of anticipations and

returns between childhood and death, Pater has created in “Emerald Uthwart” a biography which is not constrained within the limitations of a linear temporality. As a result, it is not bound to conclude with Emerald’s death, and as the epilogue, disguised as the “Diary of a Surgeon”, demonstrates, it does not. Instead, the arrested narrative of “Emerald Uthwart” moves simultaneously into the future and the past, a technique that I will further explore below.

First, it is important to note a peculiar aspect of the narrative interruptions which neither Iser nor Shuter discuss. It is only in the description of Uthwart’s childhood – the events that take place up to his departure for school – that his death re-emerges repeatedly, disrupting the linear progression of the narrative five times. In one of the more intrusive examples, a description of Emerald’s nature as a child ends with the unexpected affirmation of his fate: “A rather sensuous boy! you may suppose, amid the wholesome, natural self-indulgence of a very English home. His days began there: it closed again, after an interval of the larger number of them, indulgently, mercifully, round his end” (Pater, “Uthwart” 174). These repeated interruptions of his childhood by his death reveal “Emerald Uthwart” to be, according to Shuter, “little more than an extended obit - ‘he died’” (“Arrested” 12). Confronted with this structure even Shuter must concede a degree of motion in the text, admitting that “Unlike a biography, an obituary begins with the death of its subject, and therefore as a narrative it is necessarily proleptic. At least in the case of the epitaphs quoted in ‘Emerald Uthwart’ the narrative is also circular” (12-13). Not just circular, however; the disruption of the expected straightforward relation of Emerald’s time-line creates a temporality that is also disjointed. Pater then uses the obituary form to better explore the implications of the recurring interruptions of childhood by a death which both has and has not yet taken place.

In its construction as an obituary, “Emerald Uthwart” establishes its titular

protagonist as an essentially static character, and perhaps it is this inertia which William Shuter – in “The Arrested Narrative of ‘Emerald Uthwart’” – and Wolfgang Iser in *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment* confuse with an arrested narrative. It is interesting to note that while in *What Maisie Knew* the traditional critical reception has focused on the development of a character that is, as I shall demonstrate in the final chapter, essentially static, in this instance the focus has been instead on a static text that is, in fact, full of motion. In *Maisie* we see a static character hidden by a revolving and obfuscatory narrative, while in *Emerald* we find instead a chaotic and cyclical narrative – yet one which is inescapably defined by this very movement – which is veiled by the fixed temporality of its central character. It would be inadvisable, however, to misread the implications of Emerald’s stasis: it is not an indication of the finitude of death, but rather of the way that Emerald lingers in a confusion of life and death. He himself becomes fixed, marked by no development or change, a state which is suggested already in the description of his “soldier-like, impassible self-command, in his *sustained expression* of a certain indifference to things (Pater, “Uthwart” 184, my emphasis). Because he is already known to be dead, Emerald’s life can continue indefinitely, like the dateless, timeless memorial which preceded his biography. The visitor to the memorial can, without any dates to suggest otherwise, attribute any lifespan to the subject; similarly, the narrator of the biography *could* continue Emerald’s life, leave it open without describing his death, deferring the event which has already taken place and offering Emerald a kind of immortality. Although the text affirms that Emerald’s death does take place, the text’s disruption of temporality, and Emerald’s place in it, undermines its finality, even its mortality.

The compulsive repetition with which this death interrupts the description of Emerald’s childhood suggests a Freudian approach toward the understanding of loss,

constructed decades before Freud himself. Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* posits the existence in the mind of men and women of "a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle" (16). He describes this experience as particularly severe amongst sufferers of "traumatic neurosis," in which the patients "regularly repeat the traumatic situation in their dreams... It is as though these patients had not finished with the traumatic situation, as though they were still faced by it as an immediate task which has not been dealt with" ("Fixation" 315). This is very much the case in "Emerald Uthwart," as the trauma which is being repressed – Uthwart's death – has yet to occur for both the reader and the eponymous character. The containment of these repeated intrusions of death within the realm of Emerald's childhood specifically suggests a more complicated relationship between the repetition in the narration and the subject matter.

Pater creates a narrative process in which knowledge of the inevitable mortality of man, and the pre-emptive mourning for a loss which must occur, is used to redefine that loss. The suggestion of a trauma which cannot be truly experienced because it has yet to take place bears similarities to Freud's notion of the experience of loss through mourning, which he outlines in "Mourning and Melancholia". In "On Transience," an essay written after, yet published before "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud describes a similar process of pre-emptive mourning which he reads as an attempt to distance oneself from the inevitable loss of that which one knows to be transient: "What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease, and, since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience" (306). Pater contrives to configure that sense of transience not as a loss – a finite ending to be feared and a

condition of humanity which spoils the enjoyment of life and beauty – but rather as a simultaneous return to our beginnings. Death allows for a return to childhood, where imagination and the impressionable mind has not yet been limited, and offers an emergence into something new. As it is a return to the past, so it allows the past to take place as a new experience, like the memories in “The Child in the House” which, rather than being recalled, recur but as if taking place for the first time.

The child exists as the medium through which this understanding can be reached. Emerald’s death does not interrupt the narration of Uthwart’s school days or his time at college; it is specifically connected to his experiences as a child, thus positioning the child figure as central to the understanding of loss and trauma. Pater sees the child’s understanding of death as the only one which embraces the possibility of a cyclical time which is not necessarily cyclical, as a death which is a rebirth, but based on a concept of rebirth that is not limited by religious models. This is the very idea that he espouses as he explores in detail the child’s different reactions to and perception of death in “The Child in the House.” Furthermore, the child’s very experience of time mirrors the model with which Pater attempts to recast death. James Sully’s *Studies of Childhood*, published in 1895, suggested that “children have very vague ideas about time... child through his inability to represent time on a large scale is apt to bring the past too near the present” (119). This confusion of past and present is later expanded upon by Sylvia Anthony⁸ to describe the child’s experience of time as cyclical: “The recurrent sequences without clear linearity which represent time to the young child resemble the mythopoeic time described by archaeologists. This, we are told, is an eternal time without definite structure... By repetition of actions symbolically associated with the cosmic rhythms of days and seasons man seeks to ensure their continuance” (175). In writing the act of mourning that which

⁸ Anthony’s *The Discovery of Death in Childhood and After* has had a significant and continued impact on psychological studies of children’s response to death since its publication in 1972

has not yet been lost, then, Freud may posit a desire to create distance, but Pater explores the potential for a return, a rebirth.

Sully and Anthony's separation of the child figure from a linear temporality is an intriguing one. Given Honeyman's description of the "one-sided and unchecked power of adult discourse when constructing children" (30), which results in "patronising constructions of childhood" (25), we might certainly question the validity of such assertions of child-time. Yet Shuttleworth's exploration of nineteenth century studies of the child mind clearly indicates that the result of such studies or representations of child consciousness are often more significant due to the anxieties and understandings regarding children that they reveal than as tools for understanding children themselves. That both Sully, Pater's contemporary, and Anthony, writing in the twentieth century, should refer to the child's concept of time as a confusion of past and present suggests that adult constructions of childhood lend themselves to Pater's temporal disruptions.

Pater uses the obituary style to explore the process of pre-emptive mourning which signifies a return to the child, a return at death to a state of freedom, of beginnings, of open impressions, of newness. Even Freud, who sees the process of pre-emptive mourning as "wrong," associates mourning with the process of returning to a previous state in which the libido recovers its freedom from the inhibition of fixation: "Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free... When once mourning is over... we shall build up again all that [has been] destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lasting than before" ("Transience" 307). Emerald's physical death further emphasises the importance that this return to childhood carries in relation to death in Pater's prose; his literal return to a childlike state and its emphasis on purity suggests that in dying

he is freed from the limits of experience, recovering the creativity and impressionability of an open mind. In death, he is able to return to his uninhibited childhood state. Kincaid has pointed out that in our perceptions of children, the “equation of the child with ‘change,’ even contradictory models of change, is too simple, failing to account for the way the child can be and is slotted into a psychology and an erotics of loss” (67). In “Emerald Uthwart,” the child’s place within a psychology and, in many ways, an erotics of loss is what facilitates Pater’s ability to question, and therefore to change death’s role as an inescapable end, an inevitable loss that casts its shadow over life and the ability to connect to beauty. Yet “Emerald Uthwart” compounds the disruption of a linear temporality created by its obituary structure by illustrating the fusion of past, present, and future in its description of Emerald’s childhood.

Both “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart” exhibit a multiplicitous construction of time – they depict textual temporalities in which future and past exist simultaneously – yet in the latter text the depiction is much more visually constructed. Interestingly, both instances in which this construction is clearest refer to Emerald’s departure from home, the anticipation of which also forms the crisis of “The Child in the House”. A description of Emerald’s intellectual development in childhood ends abruptly with the imperative “see him as he stands, seemingly rooted in the spot where he has come to flower! He departs, however, a few days before the departure of the rest” (Pater, “Uthwart” 175). The flowering relates to Emerald’s intellectual progress, which is connected to his home – it is what roots him to the spot. However, at the same time as he is described as fixed to the home, he is moved on from that place, in an anticipation of departure. Here again there is movement, defying assertions of a ‘static’ text: while the direction of the reader’s gaze to the figure of Emerald Uthwart “as he stands” has been described by

Shuter as a reminder of Emerald's physical beauty, it is an interpretation which completely dismisses both the motion in the passage and the complex structure of time that it creates. Emerald is at once standing still, anticipating departure, and in the act of departing. Note that he is not due to depart, he "departs" just as he "stands:" although the reference is to a future action, the use of present tense places Emerald in a collision of motion and inertia, as well as past, present, and future.

The second reference to Emerald's departure is also the fourth, and final intrusive reference to his death: "Emerald Uthwart was born on such a day 'at Chase Lodge, in this parish, and died there.' See him then as he stands! counting now the hours that remain, on the eve of that first emigration, and look away next at the other place, which through centuries has been forming to receive him" (175-6). Once again we are directed to "see" Emerald as he stands still, at the same time anticipating a future event. He is standing on the "eve of that first emigration" from Chase Lodge; yet, is it the departure from Chase Lodge that is being referred to? The emphasis up to this point has been on Emerald's relationship to his home, demonstrated by the focus placed on his departure and absence from it; however, that absence and departure have also been associated with his death. Furthermore, "the other place" to which Emerald is destined to go is one which has been forming to receive him for centuries: it is old, and of the past, yet simultaneously of his future. This passage thus encompasses future, memory, and death: Emerald's departure from his childhood home has not yet happened, but the reader knows that it has, just as his death has not yet happened, but the reader has already been told about it several times. Emerald is anticipating a future that is to take place in a world of the past. The time which the child inhabits is unstable – for Emerald, at least, it is not linear; his story is not one of progression from birth to death. This disruption of time within the narrative tends to centre around the deferral of Emerald's death; Emerald's life begins with this event,

and each subsequent mention is but a further deferral of the fact. This delay offers the possibility of immortality; Emerald is already dead, and yet he is not dead.

The use of the child figure to disrupt linear temporality is, for Susan Honeyman, a common endeavour in literary representations of children. She suggests that literary attempts on the part of authors to “indulge in the play of representing childhood, especially as non-linear and outside of legitimated discourse, reflects a desire for something anti-thetical to their own art... childhood becomes an escape from rationalist adulthood” (27). While I agree that Pater’s use of the child and childhood in an attempt to remould death in the image of immortality certainly bears the hallmarks of an escape from rationalist adulthood, I believe that Jesse Matz is right when he suggests that “a commonplace regret keeps Pater from any facile primitivism, and demands from him some strategy, beyond escape into a world of children, to regain some sense-certainty” (58). In fact, although Pater inextricably links the child to his disruptions of linearity, so that the child’s significance to this unstable time scheme cannot be denied, the temporal disruption in both “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart” suggests that it does not exist in and of the child figure alone.

The confusion of time continues to haunt the narrative even once Emerald has left his childhood home; as a scholar he becomes “like a real portrait of a real young Greek... alive among the paler physical and intellectual lights of modern England, under the old monastic stonework of the Middle Age” (191). Emerald’s body thus occupies an intersection of eras: where his child-self acted as a point of both motion and stasis, Emerald’s adolescent self is surrounded, even defined by Ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, and nineteenth-century England simultaneously. His embodiment of the Grecian youth, furthermore, places Emerald in relation to a Hellenistic ideal of beauty. Emerald becomes an echo of the past, a portrait that is so realistic as to seem

alive, bringing forward the ideals of Ancient Greece, or perhaps returning modern England to them. This returning of the modern to the ideals of the past becomes more fully realised in the companionship that forms between Emerald and a classmate, one which looks back to the Grecian ideals that Emerald comes to embody.

The friendship that develops between Emerald and Stokes centres almost entirely around Emerald's intellectual awakening and the sharing of knowledge: "James Stokes, the prefect, [Emerald's] immediate superior; [sic] awakes for the first time into ample flower something of genius in a seemingly plodding scholar" (184). This relationship specifically revolves around a reinterpretation of the classic Greek concept of *paiderastia*, which Matz points out "makes the love of an older man for a younger man not only a Greek ideal, but a modern way to return to the Greek ideal of 'perfect knowledge'" (69). This description of *paiderastia* – particularly its dependence upon a relationship between an older and a younger man – would seem to exclude Emerald's and James' intimate friendship; however, as I shall demonstrate, Pater does not reconstruct *paiderastia* in its purest sense. Instead he reconstructs the essence of the model, the desire for an immortality of ideas, in "Emerald Uthwart". The emphasis on *paiderastia* as a return to the past, a resurrection of "perfect knowledge," takes on a much more literal connotation; though initially "dead" to Emerald, the classical texts that he is studying become "associated directly now with the living companion beside him" (Pater, "Emerald" 184). The relationship between James and Emerald is founded on the immortality of ideas and literature, which are for Plato the offspring of the soul and a part of man's drive to become immortal. If Emerald's relationship with James might seem irrelevant in a study of Pater's child figures, the structure of the text itself, and of Emerald himself, argue against such a dismissal: like Florian, whose return to a state of childhood occurs simultaneous to a textual experience of his child-self, so

Emerald – through the death yet to take place which hangs over the narrative in its entirety – is always already transformed back into his child-self. The textual recollection of his life, even when no longer focused on his literal childhood, is still bound up in the eventual return to an eternal child-state.

The connection between Emerald and James' relationship and a drive for immortality as outlined by Plato becomes yet more explicit as Emerald himself "finds the Greek or the Latin model of their antique friendship or tries to find it, in the books they read together. None fits exactly" (185). The Greek and Latin models that Emerald consults had, as Linda Dowling points out, become interwoven for some with the process of education at Oxford, where it became apparent that "[The Platonic] model of love – by which an older man, moved to love by the visible beauty of a younger man, and desirous of winning immortality through that love, undertakes the younger man's education in virtue and wisdom – could be recaptured within the existing structures of Oxford homosociality: the intense friendship, the tutorial, the essay society" (81). It is this model, the recaptured essence of Platonic love rather than Platonic love itself, that characterises Emerald and James' relationship, and that also leads to Oxford. Pater is not merely rewriting Platonic love in his fiction. He is exploring the philosophy of intellectual growth and the desire for immortality that provides a foundation for Plato's model; rather than dividing the path to immortality between physical love and the pursuit of ideas, "Emerald Uthwart" promotes a synthesis of the two.

When Emerald and James are divided by James's military execution, Emerald's reaction is described from a strangely distant perspective, and his grief is referred to only briefly: "[Emerald] actually came round again to the scene of his disgrace, of the execution; looked in vain for the precise spot where he had knelt... wept then as never before in his life; dragged himself on once more" (Pater,

“Emerald” 207). It is interesting that this period in Emerald’s life is accorded so little attention given the importance of Emerald’s relationship with James and the extremity of his grief for his lost companion. If Emerald and James’ relationship is read as having been modelled on the Oxford adaptation of Platonic love, then the cold treatment of their separation does not accord with the emphasis that Plato placed on the love between men as a higher form of love. For Plato, the relationship between an older man and his young protégé, and their intellectual offspring, offered the greatest opportunity for immortality. Why then this unceremonious treatment of James’ and Emerald’s lost love?

Emerald’s recollection of the execution does not present the same kind of intense return that characterised memory in “The Child in the House”, or even the interrupted narrative of childhood at the beginning of “Emerald Uthwart”. Despite a literal return to the “scene of his disgrace,” Emerald can only “loo[k] in vain” and “dra[g] himself on once more” (207). It seems that once again Pater has departed from Plato’s original model; rather than valuing a mentoring relationship and the sharing of wisdom and knowledge between two men as the ideal means of defying mortality, Pater turns inward, embracing the self as offering that opportunity. For Pater, it is the child-within-the-self and its ability to endure, the possibility of rebirth that it offers, that presents the only means of surpassing death. As with the description of the *revenants* in “The Child in the House”, the emphasis is on the child figure and childhood in connection with death; as in “The Child in the House”, only death itself contains the ability to return one to the beginning, and only the child figure and childhood offer the possibility of such a return.

Emerald’s own death is surrounded by his childhood; just as the anticipation of the event interrupted the narrative of his childhood, memories of the past create the scene for his death: “[Emerald] gazes round at the place, the relics of his uniform,

the letter lying there. It was as if there was nothing more than could be said.

Accounts thus settled, he stretched himself in the bed he had occupied as a boy, more completely at his ease than since the day when he had left home for the first time”

(211). In death Emerald once more becomes a child, occupying the figure of the child both physically and emotionally when he lays down “in the bed he had occupied as a boy,” a description that is somewhat reminiscent of Adam’s great crypt which restores its sleepers in MacDonald’s *Lilith*. Emerald’s return to childhood is depicted much more literally in the description of his autopsy offered in “The Diary of a Surgeon”, included as an appendix or epilogue to the narrative itself: “Deceased was in his twenty-seventh year, but looked many years younger; had indeed scarcely yet reached the full condition of manhood. The extreme purity of the outlines, both of the face and limbs, was such as is usually found only in quite early youth” (213).

Emerald has returned to the “purity” of childhood, and in so doing he has come to represent what Kincaid refers to as the “action taken against transience on behalf of the desire to possess and hold the child in time” (199). It is a desire that Kincaid posits as the motivating force behind the “incessant nineteenth-century (and modern) child-photography,” as the photographer and the viewer attempt to do precisely what the narrator accomplished earlier in the text. Like child-photography, and like the childhood images of Emerald standing, unmoving yet preparing to move, combining motion with inertia and the present with the past, his child-corpse suggests a return to the beginnings of life.

Emerald’s pure childish body becomes ageless in death, as if the days of his adult life were not inscribed on his body; he becomes the bodily representation of the numberless memorial that opened the story of his life, in a sense immortal. He has died several times and not at all. Earlier in the narrative, Emerald reflects upon college life, noting that it “seemed to him, seemed indeed at the time, had he

ventured to admit it, a strange prolongation of boyhood” (195-6). However, it is death that offers Emerald such a prolongation of his childhood. Even after the long-anticipated event of his death has been confirmed within the text, it remains an unsure, unstable state: “Respited from death once, he was twice believed to be dead before the date actually registered on his tomb” (211). The deferral of Emerald’s death in the narrative is repeated in the description of the event itself; and yet the death is not necessarily confirmed. Emerald was “twice believed to be dead” before the date registered on his tomb, but this is not concretely identified as the day that he died; the text constructs a deliberately evasive account of his death. This detail allows Emerald an extension of life after death in quite a literal sense, even if only temporarily. For although Pater may be able to recast death in his fiction, the paradoxical nature of the return to childhood in place at the end of life that he depicts in both “Emerald Uthwart” and “The Child in the House” means that this reconstruction will always be called into question. The confusion surrounding Emerald’s time of death literalises Pater’s attempt to question death’s finality, constructing the moment of death as elusive and unsubstantial. Similarly, the flowers that surround Emerald’s body, like the violets that marked the grave of the dead child in “The Child in the House,” give rise to thoughts of the transition from flesh to earth, echoing Pater’s reconsideration of death through the cyclical temporality which characterises both narratives.

The notion of death as a beginning rather than an end is not uncommon; nor, in its essence, is the idea of death as a return to the past, a repetition that is yet a new experience. Pater recognises existing embodiments of these ideas. The recurring connection between flowers and the grave in both “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart” evokes a long-standing literary tradition which represents death in accordance with a natural cyclicity, while the relationship between Emerald and

his school-mate James in “Emerald Uthwart” is an exploration of the love between men, resulting in offspring of the soul, that Plato proffered as the best step towards achieving the desire for immortality that drives all mortal beings. Despite Pater’s acknowledgement of these ideas, they do not offer the concept of death that he seems to want to capture; instead, “Emerald Uthwart” and “The Child in the House” focus on the child figure as that which allows for confusion, intersection, and disruption, and ultimately the reconfiguration of death as a return to the past, as a re-beginning. Most importantly, death is constructed in both texts as a return to the child and the subsequent freedom from the limitations that are imposed on the child’s sensibility and open approach to life and beauty. The intensity of the return in “The Child in the House” is related to death through Florian’s role as a revenant within his reminiscences, while the Child’s own perception of death embraces this return and emphasises it, particularly in the image of the perennial violets. In “Emerald Uthwart”, suggestions of immortality emerge repeatedly throughout the text: in images of Emerald that place him at the intersection of motion and stasis, and of past, present, and future; Emerald’s Platonic relationship with James Stokes; and Emerald’s final, physical return to his child-self after death.

The relationship between death and the child figure, the yearning for a lost Edenic childhood – none of these are unique to “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart”, nor are they at all unique to Pater’s portraits and essays. Yet in these texts Pater’s approach to the child’s relationship with death, and his interpretation of our nostalgia for childhood, is fascinating. The influence of Pater’s engagement with the child figure and its transformation of death can be seen in Lee’s work, which is perhaps not surprising given that much of her writing exhibits a close affinity with Pater’s. What is interesting is which particular elements of the Paterian child figure seem to have held significance for Lee; these appear to be the depiction

of an aesthetic education which characterises “The Child in the House” and the location of childhood within a distinct physical and figurative space. While these ideas are carried through Pater’s texts quite subtly, providing nuance to his construction of the child figure, for Lee they take centre stage. Yet for both aesthetes the child figure is closely tied to death and immortality: in Pater’s portraits, the non-mortal death acts as a return to the child and childhood, and in Lee’s essays and fiction the creation of an aesthetic child space carries the potential to transcend beyond death itself.

“This fountain of radiance”:

The Transcendent Child in Vernon Lee

“And yet who knows whether in reality there was not on this occasion a tacit agreement between the little Christ-child and death?”⁹

One of the most striking features of Vernon Lee’s body of work, apart from volume and variety, is its fluidity and multiplicity of influences and voices. Her texts blur the divisions between styles and genres, fusing critical essay with personal reflection and fairy-tale fantasy. And yet, as Vineta Colby points out in “The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee” (1970), “in a sense almost everything that Vernon Lee wrote bore the stamp of fiction. She did not write narrative often, but she made history, biography, and aesthetics accessible to her readers by using the techniques of prose fiction” (235-236). Lee’s perspectives on and representations of the child are in many ways similar to her writing itself. Her child figures also first seem multifaceted and changeable, yet on closer examination it is in precisely these inconsistencies that the essence of Lee’s child figure can be uncovered. Although her vision of the child may not be as clearly outlined as Pater’s, her fictional representations of the child figure,

⁹ Vernon Lee, “Christkindchen” (192-3).

when analysed in light of her critical discussions, identify a kinship between the child and an idealised aestheticism which is common to her otherwise disconnected discussions of childhood. This relationship between the child figure and a world of art and beauty culminates in an image of radiant transcendence.

Lee's expressed opinions on the finite and static nature of childhood and the sharp and inexorable divide between the child-self and the adult-self, as outlined in her introduction to *Juvenilia* (1887) and a number of the essays in that collection, suggest an interest in the child purely in relation to its impact on the adult self. She often focuses intensely on the importance of an aesthetic education in childhood to the formation of an aesthetically-aware adult, posing in *Juvenilia* "the question of being led; and in which direction; of being led towards good or towards evil, in darkness or in light" ("Introduction" 19). The collection, her second set of essays on sundry aesthetical questions, is presumably a guide towards good. Furthermore, Lee frequently denies any possibility of recalling the child-self or returning to one's childhood. However, in her fictional, or at least overtly fictionalised representations of the child figure – particularly in "The Child in the Vatican" (1883), "Christkindchen" (1897), and "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child" (1906) – many of Lee's critical expressions on childhood and the limitations of the child figure are complicated. While the child with all of its freedom is elsewhere described as impossibly separated from and irretrievably lost to the adult mind,¹⁰ here she envisions an eternal child figure which all of her adult figures can access. While the vivid recollection of childhood sensations has been dismissed as "delusive" in the introduction to *Juvenilia* (9), in "The Child in the Vatican" and "Sister Benvenuta" she creates spaces within which the adult can return by proxy to the unfettered world

¹⁰ In the introduction to *Juvenilia*, Lee describes childhood as being "far removed from every baseness. The danger of baseness, indeed, comes later, with the consciousness of imperfection and conflict, with the necessity of making a choice" (6) Once the choice is made, the simplicity of "those aesthetic, classic, Goethian days" (7) can be momentarily recalled, but "it is delusive" (9).

of the child. Despite seeming to deny any lingering presence of the child which characterised Pater's selfhood, Lee consistently returns to the child as a figure imbued with the ability of beauty and art to move beyond death, or at least to reconfigure it.

Lee's conception of the child figure differs in many ways from those of her contemporaries, particularly in its association with religious images and in the apparent fluidity of her representation. The Paterian child figure links death, memory, and immortality to a return to the child-self, which is still present in later versions of the self, and does so comparatively consistently. To understand Lee's child figure, however, and its eventual role in the reinterpretation – and surpassing – of Christian morality by means of aestheticism, we must first consider the development of an aesthetic Ideal which Lee describes as an intrinsic element of the child's world, and her construction of extra-linguistic child-spaces. Where Pater achieves a reconsideration of death largely by means of temporal disruption, Lee accomplishes the same end through the creation of spaces which confuse the states of life and death. Once these spaces have been outlined, and their relationship to the child and the aesthetic Ideal made clear, the transcendent conclusion of "Sister Benventua and the Christ Child" is revealed as an appropriation of Christian models of both morality and mortality, replacing moral virtue with the aesthetic Ideal and recasting the moment of death as an event fused with life.

The child figure in Lee's works has been largely neglected in critical discussion, probably because at first glance it seems not to occupy a central place in her essays and fiction. Currently, Sophie Geoffroy's "Heurs et Malheurs de L'Enfance dans les textes de Vernon Lee", or "Fortunes and Misfortunes of Childhood in the Texts of Vernon Lee" (2009), remains the only exploration of the child figure in Lee's texts. Similarly, Lee's construction of multiple, overlapping

worlds within the text – itself already a separate space, as I shall explain further on – is a subject which has been largely overlooked. Hilary Fraser’s “Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between” (2005) and Patricia Pulham’s *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (2008), raise the idea of worlds and spatiality as an important motif in Lee’s essays and fiction, but neither focuses entirely on the nature of such constructed and created spaces and their implications. Lee’s creation of worlds is alluded to briefly in Christa Zorn’s *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (2003), but again, it is never directly addressed. Yet both the child figure and these distinct spaces and worlds resonate throughout Lee’s essays and fiction. By looking at the nature of literary space as outlined by Ricardo Gullon in “On Space in the Novel” (1979), and by considering the significance of the child figure’s relationship to spatiality, we can better understand the role that the child figure plays in Lee’s theory of aesthetics and her concept of the aesthetic Ideal, and its subsequent significance in her reconfiguration of death.

Critical discussion of Lee covers topics such as sexuality, aestheticism, decadence, history, intellectualism, and the supernatural, yet few critics mention her perspectives on religion. This is an odd omission – Christian imagery and depictions of Christianity characterise her work almost as much as descriptions of the mythical, which much of the scholarship covers at least briefly, if not in detail. But understanding Lee’s perspectives on religion is essential to exploring the role and nature of the child in her work, given that elements of the two are frequently and closely entwined. Colby describes Lee’s early life as being largely shaped by her mother, a woman who “despised sight-seeing, had not the slightest enthusiasm for monuments, grand vistas, and holy shrines... but was apparently content to reader her favourite eighteenth-century authors [and] lecture her children on the irrationality

and corruption of organized religion” (5).¹¹ The latter is a perspective that appears to have had a significant impact on Lee. In her fictionalised essay “The Responsibilities of Unbelief” (1883), the character Vere expounds upon the hollowness of religious schemes in a passage which is worth quoting at some length:

Christianity, Buddhism, Positivism – they all assumed to quiet our conscience with the same hollow lie... always the same answer, the evil permitted or planned in the past is to be compensated by the good in the future, agony suffered to be repaid in happiness, either to the worn-out, broken soul in another world, or to the old, worn-out humanity in this. Such answers made me but the more wretched by their obvious futility... Can good cause evil in the same individual, - the warmth and honour of the old man cancel the starvation and cold and despair of the youth? Can evil suffered be blotted out, and evil committed be erased? (Lee, “Unbelief” 63)

Religion, Lee reasons, is based on faulty logic; it asserts the existence of a benevolent God based on the beauty and goodness in the world but denies the subsequent conclusion that ugliness and evil in the same would therefore suggest a vicious God.

Lee takes the significance of her propositions with her into her work, and in light of them expounds on the limitations and ludicrous nature of incorporating religious and moral ideas and ideals into our conceptions of art and aesthetics. Her essay “Ruskinism”, published in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1883), is entirely focused on her disgust with what she saw as Ruskin’s attempt to “sweep usurping evil out of the kingdom of art, and to reinstate as its sole sovereign no human craftsman, but God himself. God or Good: for to Ruskin the two words have but one meaning. God and Good must receive the whole domain of art; it must become the holy of holies, the temple and citadel of righteousness” (203). As Ruth Robbins notes, “Lee’s rhetoric points us towards her disapproval of the primacy

¹¹ Peter Gunn similarly describes Lee’s mind as having been cultivated in a “free-thinking household; Mrs Paget... was sceptical and irreligious in the eighteenth-century Voltairian sense, and both [her brother] Eugene and Vernon Lee followed her, at least in this negative form of disbelief in orthodoxy... nor were they influenced at all by the Catholicism which they saw round them in France and Italy, even less by any rigorous variety of Calvinistic or Lutheran protestantism” (112-113); however, his assertions, though they seem to support Colby’s, prove difficult to validate.

of moral and religious criteria in [Ruskin's] writings on artistic subjects (143). Lee spitefully revolted against Ruskin's belief, as she saw it, that "every artistic excellence is a moral virtue, every artistic fault is a moral vice... and that the aim and end of art is the expression of man's obedience to God's will, and of his recognition of God's goodness" ("Ruskinism" 205). She saw such moralistic and religious intrusions into the discussion of the nature of art and aesthetic value as completely contrary to the reality of Beauty. Whether or not Ruskin's theories line up with Lee's interpretation of them is less significant than the nature of her bias.

Lee emphasises that "Beauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad: it is aesthetically good, even as virtue is neither aesthetically good nor aesthetically bad, but morally good. Beauty is pure, complete, egotistic: it has no other value than its being beautiful" (210), a perspective that echoes Walter Pater's conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* thirteen years earlier: "art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (213). Lee's frustration with organised religion, then, directly influences her praise of art for art's sake, of the purely aesthetic value of art and Beauty, and both become associated with the image of the child. It is no coincidence that "Ruskinism" was published in *Belcaro* alongside "The Child in the Vatican", in which text a child's discovery of pure love for, and understanding of, the world of art is constructed against the backdrop of Catholicism's beating heart. In fact, even within her essay on Ruskin Lee associates the child with her rejection of religious and moral values in the appraisal of artistic expression; she describes how "Ruskin's madness" would lead to a condemnation based on immorality of Coreggio's ceiling of St. Paulo at Parma, which she describes as "one of the most graceful and childlike works of the Renaissance" (Lee, "Ruskinism" 216). The association here between the threat posed by the imposition

of moral and religious parameters and the child as a determinant of aesthetic value prefigures the child figure's role in the juxtaposition of religious immortality and aesthetic immortality in "Sister Benvenuta."

In the introduction to *Juvenilia*, Lee offers some insight into her perspective on the world and role of the child. She describes how "one feels, at that age, that one has got [the Good and the Beautiful]... The world is beautiful, or we see only its beauty; we feel, therefore, happy; and in feeling happy... we feel also good" (9). For Lee, it is in the child's nature to engage in a kind of innocent worship of beauty in which the alignment of beauty with goodness characterises the world of childhood as one of purity and near perfection. Although this passage refers specifically to youths on the cusp of adulthood, aged about 18 or 19, the nature of the unique vision which she describes is relevant to younger children as well. Furthermore, Lee is still describing the state of childhood, but childhood as it exists in its final days, before it is consigned to the graves described in "Limbo" (5). She goes on to describe the transitory nature of the child's world, and of the impossibility of return, noting that,

Gradually, in short, we discover that to be good means, unluckily, to deal with evil; to be, I will not say beautiful, but clean and moderately healthy, spiritually, means to see much that is ugly and foul. Of course, we may still go and live with the daisies and the statues, seeing them only with the eyes of body and soul; unfortunately to live with the daisies and statues means no longer to be like unto them.
(Lee, "Introduction" 10-11)

What children must inevitably learn as they progress to adulthood leaves them unable to return to the state of innocence and the world of beauty of their youth. Adults can only simulate this prior state by living with the daisies and the statues, a life which, when considered in light of the importance Lee places on the aesthetic value of statues in multiple essays and works of fiction, is very closely connected to art.

Lee's discussion of goodness and beauty echoes the central argument of

“Ruskinism”, in which the beautiful is divorced from a mere equation with the good; however, Lee here seems almost to mourn the loss of the child-self and the simplicity of its perspective as filled only with beauty. The child’s conception of beauty is uncomplicated by religious expectations of morality despite its fusion of beauty with goodness: this association does not pose the same threat as Lee’s understanding of Ruskin’s moral aesthetic values. Instead, the child’s natural connection of these two ideas is presented as the best possible approach for the consideration of aesthetic questions. Lee may deny the immortality of a child-self suggested by Plato and embraced by Pater, but she offers up instead the purity of a child’s vision of art and beauty as an alternative means of transcending the death of the child-self.

The above passage suggests that the state which is denied adults is not that of living *with* the daisies and the statues, but of being “like unto them”. The child, therefore, is a part of the world of art, beauty, and goodness in a way that the adult can no longer be. The child’s ability to see the daisies and the statues with its own eyes, to experience goodness and beauty *as* goodness and beauty, offers a possible explanation for the child’s access to the Ideal that Lee references in a personal reflection from *Juvenilia*, “Christkindchen”. While describing in detail the image of Christmas toys which captured her fancy as a child, Lee digresses momentarily into a lament for that which the adult has lost: “Why, I wonder, should it be so much easier to snatch a sight of the Ideal when we are little, when the whole world seems good and beautiful and full of delightful mysteries, than when, as grown-up and recognising that reality is often sad and ugly and always prosaic and limited, we require the Ideal so sorely?” (187) This reference to “the Ideal” is unique in the selection of Lee’s works analysed in this discussion; however, a sense of the Ideal pervades her other works, alluded to but not openly expressed, and never directly defined. In “Christkindchen”, the Ideal is associated with a toy lamb sold at

Christmas: “I can see them even now, the beloved creatures... they were twice as long as a child’s hand, with a barrel-shaped paunch of thick wool, white and curly, and tied round with strips of red and old paper... and they had beautiful, majestic Roman noses” (Lee 183-184). However, the Ideal is not this toy itself, it is what the child is able to see *in* the toy that the adult has such difficulty glimpsing.

The entrancing beauty of this toy in the eyes of the child, and the purity of the child’s concept of the beautiful, is the basis for the innocent amalgamation of beauty and goodness that Lee suggests is only possible in the child’s mind. This unique vision allows the child to appreciate what is beautiful simply on the basis of its aesthetic value: goodness is thus determined only through beauty. The Ideal is conceived of in other forms in different texts, but always maintains this basic principle: in “The Child in the Vatican” the Ideal is constructed as a secret world of statues and beauty which only the child figure can access, while in “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child”, the Ideal is figured in Sister Benvenuta’s sensitivity to the beauty of the carved wooden puppets that come to entertain her convent. In each case, the Ideal is constructed not as a lofty aesthetic value to be studied and theorised, but as something simple yet undefinable; it is an intrinsic element of the child’s existence, that world of daisies and statues. It is the embodiment, the realisation, of the aesthetic good, the essence of all art no matter how unrefined, and in Lee’s texts it is set up in opposition to the misdirected praise of the moral good within art. Lee’s aesthetic Ideal, which I will explore in more depth later in the chapter, exists outside of language – it is indescribable – and is an essential and intrinsic part of art. Perhaps without realising it, Lee has offered an answer to her own question about the adult’s loss of the Ideal: it is a child’s kinship with the world of art, its own extra-linguistic experience, its innocence and open mind, as yet untainted by experience and limitations that enable it to glimpse the Ideal. Adults,

hindered by their experience, find the act of recognising the Ideal much more difficult.

Lee's examination of the nature of children and childhood continues in her *Juvenilia* essay "Rococo", in which she explores the child's mind directly. She asserts that "most children – at least, I wish to believe it – are consumed by violent passions... passions, strong, ideal, all-absorbing, such as can exist, perhaps, only when our fancy has not yet been messed and muddled away over realities; and is able to spread its wings freely, unconscious of the frontier of the possible and the impossible" (133-134). Here again, Lee ascribes to children a freedom from the constraints of reality which allows them insight beyond that of adults: the child stands unfettered by the evil in itself and in the world, unaware of the limitations imposed by reality, and able therefore to immerse itself fully in the world of beauty and to better understand the nature of art and form. It is a stance reminiscent of Pater, and one which is only further reinforced in "The Child in the Vatican", as we shall see. However, despite her emphasis that the child is "already in possession of whatever reasoning power and passion [it] may ever possess" (Lee, "Rococo" 134), Lee still ascribes it a kind of innocence, which is more clearly outlined in the introduction to *Juvenilia*. The child lacks the experience required to shape its passions and logical powers, and therefore its impressions, its sense of life and of art and beauty are constructed within "a mystic network of unreal relations – half understood, mysterious" ("Rococo" 135). The description of this network indicates that the child's inexperience, its intellectual innocence, places it in a mysterious space between impression and comprehension.

When this idea is related to Lee's sense of the Ideal, it reveals a clear connection between the mysterious, "half-understood" space of the child's mind and the child's ability to see a purity of art and beauty which eludes adults. In "The Child

in the Vatican” Lee refers to the child’s perception of the statues that fill the Vatican as things that have “never been born and [that] never will die” (21). This vague conception of the gap between life and death which the statues occupy is the result, or the manifestation, of the child’s “mystic network of unreal relations”. Just as it can see the Ideal, so, without the education and experience that influence adult perception, the child can glimpse something in the statues which evades adults, and that allows it to enter into the shadowy world of art eternal. Lee uses the child’s ability to see the Ideal, and the unique quality of the child’s mind, to construct a space for the child figure which overlaps with a similarly distinct world of art and beauty.

In her discussion of Lee’s use of the fantastic to “visualize sensations and feelings normally hidden from the external world and even from our own consciousness” (140), Christa Zorn touches briefly, and seemingly unknowingly, on the connection in Lee’s work between the child figure and the construction of literary spaces. When Zorn quotes Lee’s *Belcaro* essay “Faustus and Helena”, she pulls pieces of the text together in a way that highlights this relationship: “we moderns seek in the world of the supernatural a renewal of the delightful semi-obscurity of vision and keenness of fancy of our childhood; when a glimpse into fairyland was still possible... In certain words, in certain sights, in certain snatches of melody... they were spells which opened doors into realms of wonder” (Lee “Faustus” 96-97, quoted in Zorn 144). Yet, Zorn’s interpretation of this passage only notes that “by locating the desire for the supernatural in the unconscious experiences of childhood – individual and collective – Lee links historical and psychological dimensions” (144). The quoted passage offers a more expansive description of child spaces when looked at in full:

We moderns seek in the world of the supernatural a renewal of the delightful semi-obscurity of vision and keenness of fancy of our

childhood; when a glimpse into fairyland was still possible, when things appeared in false lights, brighter, more important, more magnificent than now. Art indeed can afford us calm and clear enjoyment of the beautiful--enjoyment serious, self-possessed, wide-awake, such as befits mature intellects; but no picture, no symphony, no poem, can give us that delight, that delusory, imaginative pleasure which we received as children from a tawdry engraving or a hideous doll; for around that doll there was an atmosphere of glory. In certain words, in certain sights, in certain snatches of melody, words, sights, and sounds which we now recognise as trivial, commonplace, and vulgar, there was an ineffable meaning; they were spells which opened doors into realms of wonder; they were precious in proportion as they were misappreciated. We now appreciate and despise; we see, we no longer imagine. And it is to replace this uncertainty of vision, this liberty of seeing in things much more than there is, which belongs to man and to mankind in this childhood... (Lee, "Faustus" 96-97)

Once again we have a description which evokes the Ideal Lee outlines in "Christkindchen", and a clear appreciation of the child's ability to see an "ineffable meaning" in the world which is lost upon crossing the threshold into adulthood. However, what is most interesting is that the passage describes a separate supernatural space, it links this "fairyland" to the "keenness of fancy of our childhood", and suggests that it is through art – through the momentary return of "words", "sights", and "snatches of melody" – that we might access such "realms of wonder". The prospect of this return is, the passage indicates, denied adults who now "appreciate and despise", yet the depiction of the child figure as a key that opens the door to fantastic aesthetic spaces hints at the possibility of reinstating access. The process by which this recovery might be realised is more visibly depicted in "The Child in the Vatican", a text that moves from space to space, inventing worlds in which the nature of art and aesthetic value can be explored and explained.

i. Shadowy Worlds in "The Child in the Vatican"

"The Child in the Vatican" opens with the image of the deadened adult world of the Vatican, "with its long, bleak, glaring corridors; its half-lit, chill, resounding halls... a dreary labyrinth of brick and mortar," into which intrudes the exuberant

vitality of children “scamper[ing], chattering and laughing, through the gallery; jumping up three steps at a time, clambering up to windows, running round isolated rooms” (Lee, “Vatican” 17). The tale begins with the construction of a “fairy-tale” surrounding the figure of a nameless child who, being brought to the Vatican, attracts the attention of the statues who are, in this fantasy world, the imprisoned souls of demons. These “Statue-demons” decide to cast a spell on the child, to make him their own, a spell which, it is eventually revealed, was a love potion designed to cause the child to fall in love with Rome, with the statues, and through them, with the world of art and beauty. The essay, for despite its fictionalised beginnings it is intended to be an essay, then moves into a discussion of aesthetic education and the importance of form, which is explored through a detailed literary reconstruction of the statues of Niobe and her children, originally from the Villa Medici in Rome but housed in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

Lee initially introduces the adult space of the Vatican as oppressive to the spirit of the “barbarian child”, to whom “this world of tintless stone can give but a confused, huge, overpowering impression of dreariness and vacuity” (19). Immediately, she begins the description of an existing space, painting an image of that particular world – the “world of tintless stone” within the Vatican walls – in which she will create her fairy-tale and from which she will launch her discussion of aesthetics and form. Yet although the Vatican itself serves as the physical location within which the fairy-tale develops, what Ruth Ronen calls “the spatial construct of *the setting*” (423), the text also alludes to other, invented spaces, realities which mirror, yet are separate from our own. Ronen herself proposes such a multiplicity of spaces beyond those of setting and frame, noting that “fictional constructs of space are the products of the integration of dynamic bodies of spatial information” (421). These dynamic spatial bodies are divided by Ricardo Gullon into “invented space”

(12) and “the space of the created object itself” (14). Gullon’s focus is not on Blanchot’s space of literature, on the abstract space in which literature itself dwells, but rather more on what Ronen describes as the “fictional universe”, the “domain of settings and surroundings of events, characters and objects in literary narrative, along with other domains (story, character, time and ideology)” (421). Gullon describes literary spaces as being where the text “exists, and it is there that [the text] has an operative force” (12). However, where Ronen is concerned with the technical construction of literary spatiality, Gullon explores the significance of spaces within the fictional text.

Gullon suggests that literary spaces are laden with “several levels of meaning, according to the method of reading. The same facts take on a different resonance in distinct plans: narrative, symbolic, mythic.... What is related projects toward the vaster space of what is suggested: to what is said must be added the unsayable, and to the personal, the historic” (19-20). In “The Child in the Vatican,” Lee’s decision to envelop the child figure within the shadows of the Vatican immediately places the child within a “vaster space of what is suggested,” and yet she is not content with this single, if resonant, setting: she takes it further, moving from what Gullon identifies as the “creat[ion] of space” to the act of inventing one (18).¹² The invented space, like Ronen’s “inaccessible frames... which are not actualised as immediate surroundings because they cannot be, or are not entered by characters whose actions the narrative follows” (426) is used in conjunction with created space “in order to place within [the literary space] genuinely revealing metaphor” (Gullon 18).

Gullon notes that in understanding space, “we merely translate ‘space’ for ‘universe,’ ‘world,’ or ‘scenario,’” words which all

¹² Gullon states that “the novel either creates a space... or invents one” (18). The created space is, according to Gullon, “perceptual space... habitable by man the thinker and dreamer”, but he identifies, in addition to perceptual space, the “remote but certain possibility of another kind of space, universal and abstract, not crystallized in speech, but simply suggested by the silences that complement it” (16) – the invented space.

refer to creation and, in our context, to artistic creation. All allude to a zone in which one is situated, in which one lives, but while the substitute terms seem to postulate life, movement, and situated objects, the original is somewhat indifferent, and remains aloof, in an almost insolently proud solitude. To reduce this aloofness, to qualify it, to humanize it is the goal of the novelist, who, obviously, does not burden himself with theory but rather with action, giving shape to the shapeless. (Gullon 14)

Lee's construction of the Vatican is such an act of giving shape to the shapeless; in particular, the language with which she characterises the space is quite significant: the "dreariness" and "vacuity" of the space, the "indefinable desolation" of the Vatican evoked by the "bleak... damp... dreary labyrinth" and its "over-ground catacomb of stones" (Lee, "Vatican" 17). The space constructed by such language imparts to the following events and discussion a particular character; the creation of the space is dependent upon "the impurities that give it life or the impregnation of temporality that humanizes it" which Gullon states "make explicit the meaning and scope of the novel" (15). However, Lee is not simply content to place her thoughts within a space that depicts the oppressive limitations of the adult "art-studying, rather than art-loving times" ("Vatican" 17). Within this space she imagines another, a fantastic aesthetic realm within which she composes her fairy tale. This aesthetic world overlaps with the child's unique space, constructing the child figure as mediation between the real, adult world and the "inaccessible frame" of aesthetic space.

The living child is contrasted with the statues by which it is surrounded in the Vatican, those "white things, who seem to be all the same... dead or alive: they are not ghosts, they are things which, for aught the child knows or cares, have never been born and never will die" (Lee, "Vatican" 21). The child enters into this world of the not-alive and yet un-dead statues, an eternal, liminal space that is surrounded by "life, movement, green" (21). The two spaces, the created Vatican and the invented space of the shadowy statue world, are layered, with the statue's aesthetic world

existing parallel to the Vatican, as though an alternate reality. Each space imparts its own meaning – adding another level – to the role of the child. Susan Honeyman notes that “writers often utilize childhood as a lucid space through which to criticize the adult world” (5), but Lee does not simply identify the child figure as incongruous with the oppressively vast, cold adult world of the Vatican by contrasting its laughter with the “weary” silence of her setting. She problematizes her own initial description of the Vatican by going on to create, within this space, a mysterious aesthetic world which, it is revealed, only the child can access. This second space is that in which the child falls in love with the world of art, with Rome, and, “as a part of Rome it loved, blindly, for no other reason, that desolate Vatican” (26); the fluidity and confusion of the statue-world is joined to the desolation and oppression of the adult Vatican world through the incomparable vision and understanding of the child. This space, which is, almost like the child figure itself, liminal, is a crucial part of the construction of Lee’s fairy tale.

Lee’s self-professed “fairy tale” follows the “Statue-demons”’ decision to lure the child into their own world, to make him their own. They do so by means of “a mysterious spell, a sort of invisible seed of passion which they cast direct into that little soul” (25). Following this, these ghost-like creatures begin to “shap[e] and trai[n]” the child’s soul with their “unspoken lessons” (23). Whether or not the statue-demons are intended to be read as villainous is left ambiguous; though initially described as a kidnapping, this mischievous plot on the part of the demons concludes with reference to a “seed of passion”, suggesting an act of love rather than malevolence. In fact, although words carrying negative connotations, such as “victim”, “stolen”, and “symptoms”, are used in reference to the child, the end result of the spell is revealed to be in no way negative:

And one day the child looked at itself, and perceived that it was a child no longer; knew all of a sudden that in those drowsy years of

childish passion and day dreams, it had been learning something which others did not know... This came of the statues having had the whim of giving to that child the love potion which had made it love Rome. (27)

The statues' mischievous plot, then, was nothing more than a generous gift, one which evokes in the child not simply a love of Rome, but a love and understanding of all art, and an appreciation for aesthetic value above all else. Lee notes that her fairytale depicts "the reverse of the artistic training which every individual man or woman obtains consciously or unconsciously in our own day" (28), thus revealing it as a description of an aesthetic education akin to that which Pater sketched in "The Child in the House". Lee explicitly outlines an education which is born from a passionate engagement with aesthetic impressions, while Pater depicts the same experience of aesthetic development, weaving it throughout "The Child in the House" as an unquestionably natural process. Additionally, although it may not initially seem like it, in her description of an aesthetic education Lee once again alludes to her concept of an aesthetic "Ideal".

One of the symptoms of the statue-demons' spell that the child exhibits calls into mind again this ability to connect with art and to see the beautiful on a different, simpler level. Lee describes how, "at any stray, trifling word or bar of dance music, [the child's] eyes and its whole little soul would fill with a mist of tears" (26). The child's ability to see in something that, to others, is merely "trifling," a beauty of such intensity as to fill its soul with tears, is of the same nature as Lee's own lifelong captivation with the Christmas lamb of her childhood, another seemingly trivial item in which, for reasons she cannot explain, she saw the Ideal of beauty. By explaining the vision of the Ideal as a gift from the statue to the *child*, rather than any other figure, Lee once again constructs the child as inextricably linked to the ability to understand and appreciate art and aesthetics. It is at this time crucial to remember the very oppressive language which characterised her adult world as figured in the

Vatican, as well as her description of the “art-studying, rather than art-loving” world that she seemed to see around her.

I have already noted that in her “fairy tale” Lee constructs a myth in which a lifelong kinship with the statues and their brethren in the arts – “whether in stone, or sound, or colour, or written word” (27) – is cultivated in the child through its unique access to the world of the statues. Through this myth, Lee depicts an aesthetic education in which the child’s ability to see the Ideal, its unique connection to the aesthetic world, is not lost as it transitions to the world of the adult, but shapes the adult-self into a being that is also at one with the daisies and the statues. Crucially, Lee emphasises the child’s lack of a name, pointing out that “its name signifies nothing, suffice that it was a child” (24). This namelessness allows the child an emptiness, a lack of identity which enables it to be filled by the adult readers as Lee teaches them the lesson of the statues. The effect is similar to that created by Pater in the confusion of identities between Florian, the Narrator, and the Child in “The Child in the House”: the lack of a concrete relationship between the three characters emphasises the Child’s position as an abstract ideal. His experiences throughout the text, as much as they are framed in the context of Florian’s memory, could be those of any child. As much as the story appears to relate Florian’s childhood impressions, they are nonetheless attributed to a distant figure called only “the Child”. These nameless child figures are in no way representative of “real” children, nor are they intended to be. Susan Honeyman takes issue with studies of “the child” in that they “limit one’s focus to a child figure, indicating awareness of social constructedness... the choice of definite article implies a universal or stereotype” (10); however, in this instance the reduction to stereotype is a deliberate creation of an ideal child. Unlike Pater’s eponymous Emerald or Lee’s Sister Benvenuta, as we shall see, these children are left open, bereft of identity, in order to facilitate the depiction of an

aesthetic education.

Lee's description of the death of the child-self whilst relating the lessons learned by the fairy-tale child is marked by a moment of tension which reveals a subsequently imperturbable division between child, adult, and her fictional fairy-tale child. She expounds on the necessity of asking "idiotic questions... questions to answer which as they deserve, you had better get hold of your eternal fairy-story child, and ask him" (Lee, "Vatican" 31). The notion of the eternal child that Lee refers to here stands at odds with her multiple reflections on the transience and irretrievable nature of childhood and the child-self. The paradox deepens when she then asks the reader to "pretend, for a moment, that the fairy tale is true, and play, for your benefit, the part of that child" (31). She later asks her readers, "has your Vatican child learned any more from the statues?" (41) In both instances, Lee appears to be asking the reader to do what she herself presented as an impossibility a few pages prior: to know herself as a child, to think, and to learn in the same way as the child, in essence, to return to her own child-self. However, these passages specifically ask the reader to become a fantasy child, to embrace an empty "Vatican child" and to allow herself to occupy its place; in contrast to Pater's description of a child-self which lingers in the mind of the adult, only Lee's fairy-tale child is immortal, not the reader's own child-self. Whereas the individual child-self exists in the realm of the lived past, the irretrievable, the fantasy child that Lee has created transcends a life/death dichotomy. Once again, the construction of a child-space is significant: her fairy-tale child exists in the world of statues, those living and yet not-living creatures which "have never been born and will never die" (21). Like the statues, too, the child was not born, it was created – sculpted within her prose – and therefore is eternal in a way that the actual child never can be.

The child figure in "The Child in the Vatican" acts as a mediator, allowing the

adult readers a glimpse into the crucial essence of Lee's aestheticism, into the pure love and appreciation of beauty, free of religious or moral implication. Lee not only constructs this child within the statues' world – sculpture being, for Lee, the “first standard of artistic right and wrong” (28) – she also delivers it to the living world through art. Although she includes “the written word” within the arts in “The Child in the Vatican”, she does not locate it – specifically the novel – in the realm of the aesthetic, of the “great arts”. Colby notes that for Lee “literature lacks the purity, the precision, the definiteness, the ‘massive certainty’ of the other arts. It is, she once declared, a ‘mode of merely imparting opinion or stirring up emotion, the instrument not merely of the artist but of the thinker, the historian, the preacher, and the pleader’” (242). Although Lee refers specifically to the novel, her description of what disqualifies the novel from the purity of the other arts would seem to include all forms of prose, though not poetry. However uncertain she may be about the aesthetic value of literature, Lee does embrace the ethical function of prose, ascribing it “more importance in life... although... not as artistic, or valuable as painting, or sculpture, or music, it is practically more important and more noble” (Lee, quoted in Colby 243). Literature thus stands as the best means by which to explore her construction of an aesthetic education: the fairy-story offers Lee the best medium in which to exemplify the bond between the child figure and the world of art. This connection is further strengthened through the ekphrasis which characterises the latter half of “The Child in the Vatican”, which points to an affinity between the Vatican child and the statue-demons who capture him.

Following its construction of a fairy-tale and subsequent discussion of aesthetic education, “The Child in the Vatican” leaves the realm of fiction, moving into a critical discussion of form and aesthetics in relation to a sculpture of Niobe and her children, which Lee refers to as simply the Niobe or the Niobides. As she paints

an image of the sculpture, Lee demonstrates the similarities between sculpture and literature: “We see, more or less vaguely, a scene of very great confusion and horror: figures wildly shuffling to and fro, clutching at each other, writhing, grimacing with convulsed agony, shrieking, yelling, howling; we see horrible wounds, rent, raw flesh... we see the mother, agonised into almost beast-like rage and terror” (41-42). Lee’s ekphrasis of the statues places herself in the same role as the sculptor whose actions and artistic vision she is relating. If Lee takes on the guise of sculptor, then the “Vatican child” becomes her statue: the child of her fairy-story is thus reiterated as a product of the world of art, as immortal as the statues he encounters.

And the significance of Lee’s ekphrasis in “The Child and the House” extends beyond the relationship between the Vatican child and art: by attempting to re-create the statue linguistically, Lee is also delineating precisely the issue which excludes literature from the realm of “great art” - its lack of immediacy. Anyone looking at the Niobides would be struck almost instantly by the very impressions and thoughts which spread over several pages of writing, and which would be totally unavailable to anyone who speaks a different language or who cannot read. But the key phrase here is “almost instantly”. By pointing out the need for immediacy in a true understanding of art and beauty, Lee also highlights the limitations that language places on the adult as he or she experiences art. How will a person who has become absorbed within the realm of discourse experience art other than by putting it into language, be it in a written or verbal response or description, or even in her own thoughts? However, as Honeyman notes, “children in literary discourse are generally constructed as linguistically, and thus narratively, isolated... and in turn idealized as flexible sites of possible resistance to rationalism (dependence upon systematized thought) and ideology (thought-systems themselves)” (142). Lee’s child figure likewise stands outside of language, although her interest is not in constructing a site

of resistance to rationalism and ideology so much as the child's ability to immediately and fully experience the true beauty of art without relying on language as mediator or barrier.

Furthermore, the subject of "The Child in the Vatican" is, at least in part, the nature of aesthetic value and its relationship to form and content. Therefore, as she reconstructs the Niobides, Lee simultaneously guides the reader through her – or what Lee believes should be her – response to the statue. She tells her reader that "the more intense becomes our perception of the form, the vaguer becomes our recollection of the subject... we are no longer feeling emotion; we are merely perceiving beauty" (34). Here, in her lesson on form, beauty, and aesthetic value, exemplified by the Niobides and mythologised in the tale of the Vatican child, Lee offers her reader what is potentially the clearest definition of the Ideal, although it is not directly identified by that term. The absence of emotion in the face of the ultimate expression of form in all its perfection may at first seem curious, given that Lee prefaced this lesson with the description of the child whose connection to and understanding of art caused his eyes to fill with tears at even the most trivial musical phrase. What she has in fact done is to clarify just what it was that caused such an apparently emotional response in the Vatican child: apart from feeling an emotion inspired by the music, the child was simply overwhelmed by the perception of pure beauty. Unlike her adult readers, whom Lee suggests require a lesson in perceiving beauty in art, the child's freedom of mind and openness to the purity of the beautiful allow it to easily see beauty in its entirety.

The principles of the Ideal as I conceive it are still present in this essay, although the complexity of her discussion of form and artistic method might seem to cloud them. Lee warns her reader that the questions which propel lessons in aesthetic sensitivity can only be asked by "people who believe in love philters and symphonies

that talk, and children who fall in love with towns” (31); in short, by people who have retained an element of childlike idiocy. This is not idiocy of a pejorative nature, but of a liberating sort; in order for the adult to achieve the Vatican child’s aesthetic understanding, to push emotions aside and simply perceive the beautiful in its perfection of form, she must open herself to an element of childlike thought. This freedom of perception is what allows the child figure to glimpse the Ideal: the child recognition beauty in the most seemingly trifling aspects of life or art allows it to naturally develop an appreciation of the complexities of artistic form and its effect on beauty. However, in order to better understand the importance of the child and the Ideal, it is best to return to the text in which the term itself makes its first appearance.

ii. “Christkindchen” and the Aesthetic Ideal

“Christkindchen” was published in the second volume of *Juvenilia* in 1887. Like many of Lee’s texts, “Christkindchen” does not fit comfortably into any particular genre. It is intended as a personal reflection, but as I have already mentioned, Colby has made the astute suggestion that “almost everything that Vernon Lee wrote bore the stamp of fiction” (235-236). “Christkindchen” stands as an example of this fictionalised style: written in the first person, it describes Lee’s own childhood in Germany, particularly focusing on her memories of Christmas, and yet it seems to echo her fairy tale in “The Child in the Vatican,” both in form and in content, more than one might expect in a biographical essay. Lee recalls her lifelong belief in “that Baby Christ, Christkindchen as I was taught to call it by my German nurses, who brings presents to good little children” (Lee, “Christkindchen” 179). The essay paints a vivid picture of the vibrant sights and emotions tied in with Lee’s childhood Christmases, focusing on the evidently magical delivery of a Christmas tree by Christkindchen after supper on Christmas Eve. The mysterious gifts of the

Christ Child were in reality, Lee hints to her reader, delivered by her father.

Nevertheless, she maintains that “I continue to believe in that Christkindchen, as people believe in such things as are always expected and yet never come” (180). As the piece progresses, Lee describes the changes in her perception of the Christ Child, who, as she grew older, came to be associated with the bringing of love instead of a tree and, in her final encounter with the figure, with Death.

Although death is not as central to the image of the child in Lee’s works as it is in Pater’s, in some ways “Christkindchen” could be seen as quite a Paterian representation of the child. This interpretation is problematised, though, by the existence of a child figure other than Christkindchen – Lee herself. Christkindchen is by all means *a* child figure, but it is not the central child figure. That role is occupied by Lee’s own child-self, who, narrated, but never “seen” by the reader, comes to be bound up with Lee-as-narrator, the adult Lee. The essay therefore allows an aspect of the child-self to carry through into the adult-self, in contradiction to so many of Lee’s expressed views on childhood. Throughout “Christkindchen”, Lee returns to the scenes, thoughts, sensations, and emotions that she experienced as a child in a way not entirely dissimilar to Pater’s “The Child in the House”, and certainly in a way that she herself deemed to be impossible in “The Child in the Vatican”.

Furthermore, Lee openly admits, as I mentioned above, to maintaining her belief in the Christkindchen throughout her adulthood, essentially carrying an aspect of her child-self within her adult-self. In the other texts in which Lee explores the nature of the child and childhood, she tends towards what Stephen Heath, in his essay “Childhood Times”, describes as a “Post-Rousseau” vision of the child, wherein the child occupies “a special state of being. The child is different to the adult and that difference is childhood’s value and the object of our desire in the child” (18). Even in “The Child in the Vatican” when she suggests the potential of an eternal

child figure, it is disassociated from the self and configured only in terms of a fantasy child who replaces the reader's own lost child-self. Why then does she here undermine such statements by so vividly recreating her own childhood, suggesting that it continues to bleed into her professed present?

It may simply be that Lee was unaware of the contradiction she was creating. However, given that her recreation of an artistic sculpture served to cement the connection of the child's world to the world of art, it is entirely possible that here, too, she is simply sculpting an artistic representation of the child's life. As Heath points out, "to be a child is at peace, not yet 'dipped in the chameleon colours of men'. If we, we adults, try to conceive of childhood, our conceptions are degenerate, disfigured by those chameleon colours: 'of childhood, of innocence we have no concept'. Art alone, perhaps, can give something of it" (16). Given the fictionalisation that characterises even Lee's non-fictional prose, it might be proposed that her description of her child-self and her childhood experiences is an artistic representation, an exercise in fiction disguised within a first person narrative. However the fact remains that, as with Pater's "The Child in the House", Lee's narrative in "Christkindchen" is delivered in such a way as to suggest that the narrator and child figure share an identity, whether or not that identity is in fact her own. In either case, Lee uses the description of a transition from child-self to adult narrator to emphasise the division of child- and adult-self as well as the importance of an education that cultivates in the child its connection to, and understanding of, Beauty. Although Lee professes to a continued belief in Christkindchen, the essay concludes with her "last, regular, and authentic relations with the Lord Baby Christ, with Christkindchen" (199); in the end, she severs the last of the childhood experiences and places the child-self firmly in the past once more, even if its influences remain.

Lee describes the approach of a “cold, rainy, black Christmas” during which she once more began to hope that Christkindchen would appear to her as it had when she was very young. She recalls that “the door did open; and there entered Death” (191). To connect the entrance of a child figure with the dramatic entrance of death is a significant bond to make, and it is one which Lee further emphasises: “I was waiting for Christkindchen, and this other one entered. And yet who knows whether in reality there was not on this occasion a tacit agreement between the little Christ-child and Death?” (192-193). Yet Lee’s representation of the child figure’s association with death is a rather unique one. It is not quite the same as Pater’s, although similarly described along the lines of a return, in this case the return of death in the guise of a child rather than Pater’s return to childhood in death. It is also not so bleak as other prominent Victorian authors’ association between children and death: consider Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Marie Corelli’s *Boy*, and Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. In “Christkindchen” we are not presented with what Peter Coveney refers to as “a purity which must die before it is corrupted... a society [which] takes the child (with all its potential significance as a symbol for fertility and growth) and creates a literary image, not only of frailty, but of life extinguished” (149). Instead of building her story around the image of the dead child, Lee associates another child figure, Christkindchen, with Death. Not with the death of the child, but with Death itself personified. Far from negating the power of the child figure, which Coveney describes as bestowed on the romantic child through its innocence, Lee constructs a new form of power for the child in its bond with death. Furthermore, she aligns the child again with a world of Beauty by asserting that the presence of Death in the guise of the Christ Child culminated in a gift: the gift of Rome.

She is not specific with the details, but Lee suggests that on this Christmas,

Christkindchen did in fact come, but disguised as Death, “in order to bring me a great solemn gift, the knowledge of my own heart” (“Christkindchen” 193). What she does reveal is that this gift was in fact the gift of Rome, of the love of that city for which, prior to the Christmas when Death entered in the stead of Christkindchen, she had entertained no fancy; she was given to Rome, and Rome gave to her “the love... of such as can feel our love no more” (193). Just like the fantasy child’s in “The Child in the Vatican”, Lee’s love of Rome is a gift: where the fantasy child’s was from the Statue-demons, Lee’s comes from both Christkindchen and from Death, or from the meeting of the two. As in “The Child in the Vatican”, Lee’s love of Rome also comes from a confusion of life and death. The Christ Child, a vision of vitality, becomes entwined with the image of Death to create a figure simultaneously is both and neither. In “Christkindchen”, the Lee’s own child-self discovers a love of Rome through this figure of living death, and the city begins to echo the world of the fantasy child in “The Child in the Vatican” as it “turn[s] into a confused fairy tale, heard half-way between sleeping and awake” (196). Once again, Lee constructs a confused, mysterious space for the child in the gap between two states of being – in this case that of sleep and wakefulness. Like the world of the statue-demons in “The Child in the Vatican”, this invented space parallels a created space that exists in reality: in “Christkindchen” it is the city of Rome.

The similarities between the two essays allow us to consider whether the symbolism that Rome holds in “The Child in the Vatican” carries through to “Christkindchen.” In the former, the fantasy child’s love of Rome is equated with his love of sculpture and his deeper understanding of art itself; it is a love that is also born out of a fairy-tale world that exists in an invented gap-space that is layered over a created “real” space. In “Christkindchen”, Lee’s growing love is marked by her new-found appreciation for the marble “gods, all those goddesses, and nymphs, and

heroes, all that nude and white and ice-cold world, [that] seemed to seek me with their blank, white glance, smiling with the faint and ironical smile that means – ‘This creature is ours’” (198). In both essays, then, the child figure is associated with artistic appreciation and a closer understanding of beauty. In “Christkindchen”, the imagery which describes the child’s love for Rome’s charms echoes that of the daisies from the introduction to *Juvenilia* and the statues of “The Child in the Vatican”, reincarnated in this essay as “the ruins [...] among the vine roots and dry thistle flowers” (197). This connection is similarly based upon the ability of the child figure to perceive the true beauty in art – to the ease with which it can glimpse the Ideal – and thereby to the potential of the child figure to explore the idea of eternity.

Heath touches briefly on the relationship between the child and art, pointing out others’ emphasis¹³ on the “necessity of art, childhood as the source for art of a possible eternity” (21). I would argue, however, that for Lee, childhood is not simply a fount of memories on which art draws. Rather, she sees the unsullied essence of the child’s mind as a source which bears the potential to better understand art itself, to develop a love of art that has been lost in a world of study. The innocence of the child’s mind and its subsequent natural sensitivity to the purity of Beauty in its most simple form is labelled in “Christkindchen” as “the Ideal”. Yet the way that this connection between the child figure and art is depicted carries with it the possibility of immortality; the images which Lee uses to highlight this relationship are images either of natural eternity (the daisies, vines, and thistle flowers), undying endurance (the statues and ruins), or of antiquity and immortality (the Vatican and the city of

¹³ Heath is here referring specifically to the difference in Freud’s and Rainer Maria Rilke’s perspectives on “childhood’s fundamental significance,” which for Freud lay in “the temporality of analysis, to be grasped exactly in its bits and pieces and understood in its structuring - ‘historical’ - relation to the present neurosis, character, life” (21), while Rilke was more concerned with an “ideal... of an essence, an irreducible fact of childhood that nothing can alter or touch in its meaning” (21). It is to Rilke that Heath attributes the interest in the child as a source of art, an association which Pulham also points out in *Art and the Transitional Object*, suggesting that “the ‘dematerialized presence’ of the sculptural object is in Rilke’s mind inextricably linked to early childhood fantasies” (37)

Rome itself).

iii. Sister Benvenuta's Aesthetic Rapture

In the short fiction piece “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child”, Lee approaches the child figure from an entirely different angle than she does in “The Child in the Vatican” and “Christkindchen”. As I have shown above, her rejection of moral or religious qualities in considering an aesthetic appraisal of art is clearly expounded in “Ruskinism” and other essays, though religious imagery haunts many of Lee’s non-critical, fictional (or fictionalised) texts. “Sister Benvenuta”, however, figures the child in direct opposition to religion. Although it may appear – falsely, it should be noted – less concerned with the child’s relationship to an aesthetic Ideal, the story explores the same freedom of mind, in this instance positioning it as a mockery of, and alternative to, the limitations of organised religion. The child figure’s innocence and its ability to see the Ideal is a crucial element of the story’s conclusion, which is filled with references to highly religious imagery: an almost violent victory over Satan himself and a heavenly ascension. Lee places Sister Benvenuta, a figure who possesses the child-like qualities of innocence and passion, in opposition to characters who embody and enforce the limitations of religious doctrine. In Sister Benvenuta’s transcendence and triumph, therefore, Lee once more accords great power to the child and finally situates it within a dazzling image of immortality.

The story revolves around the love of a nun, Sister Benvenuta, for the waxen figure of the baby Christ used in the annual nativity scene. The tale is told through Sister Benvenuta’s letters, which she writes to the Christ doll and slips into the cupboard where the Christ Child is kept throughout the year. She describes for him in great detail the excitement of a travelling puppet-show troupe which comes to

perform at the convent, and her enthusiastic responses to the puppets themselves. Ever considerate of the lonely life led by the object of her reverence, she attempts on a couple of occasions to brighten its existence, first by contriving to smuggle the Christ Child from his cupboard so that he may enjoy the puppet-show, and then later by her efforts to procure or make a coat to cover his nakedness. Her attempts are, on all fronts, upset by the antagonistic figure of Sister Sacristan, and so in order to secure a coat for the Christ Child Sister Benvenuta enters into a deal with the Devil, incarnated in this story in a puppet likeness of himself. In an unexpected conclusion to such a Faustian exchange, however, Sister Benvenuta's resilience in the face of the Devil's temptation, as well as the devotion to the Christ Child which inspires her to enter into the deal, save her. Instead of condemnation, the story closes with the image of her soul's ascension in a radiant union with the Christ Child.

Again, as in "Christkindchen", in which one of the central child characters was the adult Lee, in "Sister Benventa and the Christ Child" the child figure is not a child at all, specifically the eponymous Sister Benvenuta. And yet, despite the prevalence of the child throughout Lee's work, the adult Sister Benvenuta is her most detailed child-character. It is also the text in which she solidifies the image of the transcendent child, an idea which is only hinted at in most of her other works. Although an adult, Sister Benvenuta is described, even by herself, as simple and child-like. Her imagined relationship with the Christ Child is not a maternal one, but is depicted more as a child's love for an imaginary friend. The letters that Sister Benvenuta leaves in the cupboard are imbued with an often mischievous, but always loving, camaraderie; she writes as if to bring him into her world, and share with him the experiences that she most enjoys: "I would show my Bambino that lovely, modest Shepherdess, and try to make her dance for him!" (5) Her resemblance to a child is frequently suggested and even explicitly stated. Take, for instance, a letter in

which Sister Benvenuta describes herself as a child: “I was an uncommon worldly little girl, greatly addicted to playing about in the gardens, and rolling on the grass, and smelling flowers” (12). In the text’s final paragraphs, Sister Benvenuta’s cousin reveals to the reader that the adult Sister Benvenuta has retained these same childish qualities: “[Sister Benvenuta] was but little esteemed in our convent, being accounted a simpleton and little better than a child... [She had] pleasant humours and fancies, in which indeed she resembled a child, greatly loving music and such tales as nurses repeat, and flowers and small animals, even to the point of taming lizards and mice” (14).

It is interesting that many of Sister Benvenuta’s child-like qualities are equated with her simplicity, evidently a sign of mental deficiency which she makes up for with her good nature and devotion. The fact that Sister Benvenuta, in the character of a “simpleton” adult, constitutes Lee’s most detailed child figure is perhaps indicative of the correlation that, according to Shuttleworth, was drawn in the mid-nineteenth century between the state of childhood and that of idiocy or madness – of not being of sound mind (48-9). Yet in the juxtaposition between the caring, if naïve, Sister Benvenuta, and the nuns of the convent who see her simplicity as a fault, the text seems to favour its heroine. This suggests that far from drawing a serious connection between simple-mindedness and a child’s, or child-like mind, Lee aims to once again privilege that state of innocence in which one can “believe in love philters and symphonies which talk” and ask “idiotic questions” (Lee, “Vatican” 31).

In addition to the number of instances in which she is directly referred to as child-like, or compared to a child, Sister Benvenuta is also frequently treated as a child by those at the convent. She unknowingly reveals the condescension with which she is treated, even by the Mother Abbess: in response to her request to clothe the Christ Child doll, Sister Benvenuta relates that “Mother Abbess looked at me

long, smiled, and even pinched my cheek, saying, ‘Truly our Sister Benvenuta Loredan was made to be the nursery-maid of Heaven’” (Lee, “Benvenuta” 9). The Mother Abbess’s condescension is harmless, however, in comparison to the antagonistic dynamic which comes to characterise Sister Benvenuta’s relationship to the convent. Her desire to provide a cloak for the Christ doll instigates a confrontation between aesthetic child-world of Sister Benvenuta and the harsh, unyielding religious space of the convent around her.

I have previously mentioned Lee’s anti-religious views, yet, despite rejecting Christianity, Lee denied outright atheism as well: a tension she explored in the essay “The Consolations of Belief”, published alongside “The Responsibilities of Unbelief” in *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* in 1883:

The original cause of all phenomena – that is all we have a right to define God. But that this cause should imply will, scheme, plan, consciousness is merely attributing to the Unknown the qualities of the known – attributing to God the modes of existence and of action of man. God has made man, God has placed instincts in man – is God made in man’s image that you should say that He makes or plans or designs? ... Of God, who is beyond the boundary of the directly or indirectly knowable, of God, who is merely a surmise, a phantasm created by the necessity of our reason, which may or may not have a corresponding reality, we assert attributes which are intelligible only of creatures identical with ourselves. (109)

Therefore, it was not necessarily spirituality or faith itself with which Lee took issue, it was its specifically the logic, irrational arguments, and moralism of organised religion. As demonstrated in her essay on Ruskin, Lee did not hold with the idea of ascribing morals and intent where she felt there were none, whether in religion or in art.

This is no doubt why, as Sophie Geoffroy points out, the text “describes firstly the education of young girls as an enterprise of censorship and imprisonment, embodied by the image of a convent. This Piranesian prison, closely associated with a child whose development is refused, symbolises the yoke of education and

socialisation which coincides with the entry into the regime of language and the discovery of the Law” (Geoffroy-Menoux, my translation). Not only is the convent figured as a prison, but the authority of the Christian atmosphere – associated with law, language, and society – is frequently called into question by the very depiction of Christianity in the text. This takes place particularly in the juxtaposition of, and conflict between, the harsh Sister Sacristan and Sister Benvenuta, in which the former thwarts the latter’s attempts to brighten the existence of the “Bambino”: “I had laid a plot... to steal the key of that cupboard and take out my dear little Child Christ, and hide Him... just opposite the stage, so that He might enjoy the performance. And the Sister Sacristan double-locked the cupboard after Matins, and counted the keys, and hung the bunch at her waist with a most defiant look at me” (Lee, “Benvenuta” 8).

The battle between Sister Sacristan and Sister Benvenuta continues, as Sister Benvenuta’s desire to make a coat for the Child Christ, in order to keep him warm in his cupboard, is thwarted by Sister Sacristan, who claims that “the Bambino never had any clothes on, that the sash even was a concession to modesty, but that no one had ever heard of His wanting to be dressed; the proposal being new-fangled and (did it not come from a sister notoriously prayed for as a simpleton) almost such as to suggest dangerous heresies” (9). Sister Sacristan’s harsh and insulting response to Sister Benvenuta’s proposal is even further demonised when contrasted with Sister Benvenuta’s tortured attempts to fashion her own coat, however misshapen, for the Bambino, a project that is described with the utmost sympathy: “Every fold will be stitched with a little throb of my loving heart” (10). Geoffrey describes Sister Sacristan and the elder nuns as “complian[t] with religious rules without ever questioning their faith, and who ‘act like machines, without freedom’” (my translation). She suggests that “what Benvenuta refuses is to imitate these machines,

which themselves mimic representations (statues and portraits) of the divine” (my translation). The dynamic that Geoffroy identifies between Sister Benvenuta and the world of the convent is accurate; however, Sister Benvenuta’s “refusal”, I would argue, is constructed as a struggle, with Sister Benvenuta’s transgression defined only in opposition to Sister Sacristan’s desperate clinging to doctrine and dogma. This struggle undermines the validity of the Christian world in which Sister Benvenuta lives, and by extension that of Christianity as a whole. Since her actions are depicted as being motivated by genuine simplicity and love, Sister Benvenuta emerges the winner – or at least the rightful winner – in each confrontation.

The implications of this subversion of Christian doctrine are also significant for the relationship between the aesthetic space and that of the child, a connection which is fundamental in the text’s final confusion of life and death in a radiant ascension. As the child figure, Sister Benvenuta represents the aesthetic ideal in a religious world; her identification with the visual and with artistic creation is underscored by her repeated association with dolls and puppets.¹⁴ Throughout much of the text she is preoccupied with the impending puppet show, and prior to the show she describes playing with the puppets with some other sisters:

There was a Shepherdess and a Hero with a blonde wig and a Roman dress, who were quite easy to manage, and the two sisters made them dance a minuet... Atalanta Badoer, a novice and my cousin, fetched a lute which had remained over from Sunday’s musical Mass, and began to play a *furlana* beautifully. I thought, “Does my Bambino hear the music in His cupboard?” But some of the elder sisters reprimanded her and took the lute away. (Lee, “Benvenuta” 5)

In addition to associating herself with the puppets, Sister Benvenuta here places herself in the midst of a moment of music and joy, fully representative of the purity

¹⁴ For an alternative reading of this relationship, see Pulham, who explores the significance of the doll in Lee’s stories as a transitional object which “‘performs’ in a doll game that creates a transitional space in which identity and power can be explored” (78), and suggests that “For Lee, these wax doll-madonnas, with their uncanny verisimilitude to the female body, are perhaps too disturbing as objects of adoration and reverence outside the realms of fantasy. Yet, her tale stages a metaphorical journey into this female and, more importantly, maternal body: a journey which once again figures subtle shifts in gender and a negotiation of sexual identity mediated... via images of heterosexual desire” (89).

of Beauty which was so central a concept to Lee. The moment is disrupted by the intervention of “elder sisters”, invested with a religious authority that is here placed in direct opposition to Sister Benvenuta’s world of puppets and music.

Similarly, Sister Benvenuta’s relationship with the wooden Christ doll is founded on the aesthetic Ideal; both the Christ Child doll and the cast of puppets from the show are, in a crude way, statues. Though made of wood and wax, for Sister Benvenuta they exist within the same shadowy statue world of “The Child in the Vatican”: an aesthetic realm which is juxtaposed with the restricting Catholic convent. She conceives of the Bambino as a living creature, and animates him in her mind, ascribing to him the ability to smile, laugh, or feel cold, and in her description of the puppet representing the Devil she elides her memories of real people with the inanimate doll:

He reminds me of my brother’s tutor, into whose bed (he was a priest of the Oratory) the bad boys used to put hedgehogs, and he would prick himself, and cry out all in Latin. Only I was sorry for the tutor; and I am not a bit sorry for the Devil... Oh, dearest Bambino, what fun it would be if you and I could only play him a good enough trick! ...How I wish I had a better memory and were less of a dunce! I should like to remember some of the tricks which the Holy Fathers in the Desert, and the other glorious ones in the Golden Legend, played upon him—not on the puppet, of course, I mean. (Lee, “Benvenuta” 7)

Although she envisions the puppets and dolls as animated and sentient, Sister Benvenuta yet remains conscious that they *are* puppets, and similarly that the Christ Child is a doll and not a living child. She conceives of both the Christ Child and the puppets in the same way as the child viewed the statues in “The Child in the Vatican”, as neither living nor dead.

Although Geoffroy refers to Lee’s engagement with “the typically Hoffmanian theme of the strange and disturbing confusion of the animate and the inanimate” (my translation), it is interesting that the image of animated dolls and puppets, in essence akin to Hoffman’s automaton, recurs throughout “Sister

Benvenuta” without such unnerving connotations. The image of the living doll also appears in James’ *What Maisie Knew*, but, as I shall show in chapter four, James emphasises this “disturbing confusion”; its appearance haunts the text as a reminder of Maisie’s own inherent monstrosity. In “Sister Benvenuta”, however – as with Pater’s *revenants* in “The Child in the House” – the living doll is stripped of its horror by the cleansing innocence of the aesthetic Ideal with which it is imbued by the child. Even the Devil puppet with which Sister Benvenuta makes her Faustian pact in the conclusion of the story is denuded of any horror, becoming instead an object of laughter. The child’s unique perception aligns these figurines with the grand statues in the Vatican, seeing in them beauty to which the adult world is blind, and thus assigning them a place in the aesthetic realm. Furthermore, Sister Benvenuta’s love invests the waxen Christ Child doll with the aesthetic Ideal evoked in “Christkindchen”; the doll carries for her a sublime fascination which no one else is able to understand, let alone share.

Sister Sacristan and the “elder sisters”, in their role as vessels for Christian understanding and discourse, also represent the limitations imposed on the adult mind in general. What keeps those “grown-ups” who so sorely need to see the Ideal from doing so is that which is instilled in them as they age: experience, logic, and, as I shall discuss below, language. The limitation of adult perspective was treated with sarcastic derision in “The Child in the Vatican”. In “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child”, the association of this limited understanding with Christianity serves to propose the aesthetic Ideal, and the qualities which are essential to see it, as a replacement for religious morality. This replacement echoes Lee’s description of an aesthetic education which would eschew the development of the art-studying mind in favour of the art-loving mind; it also calls to mind her vehement rejection of religious morality in the determination of artistic value in “Ruskinism”.

The morality which “Ruskinism” suggests is imposed on aesthetic value is a Christian morality in particular, and this opposition between the religious and the aesthetic is mirrored in both “The Child in the Vatican” and “Christkindchen” as they construct purely aesthetic worlds which divide the artistic beauty of Rome and the Vatican from the religious spaces. In both “The Child in the Vatican” and “Christkindchen” these spaces are founded upon the child’s perception of an aesthetic Ideal as that which is lost in the transition to a world of morality and study. Sister Benvenuta’s ability to see the Ideal is what allows her to triumph over the religion of Sister Sacristan, to achieve the kind of transcendence so celebrated in Christianity. Although the adult is barred from this rapture, Lee’s call for an aesthetic education which nurtures the child’s unique perspective and her construction of an adult child figure raise some hope. Christianity is built from the principle that human beings are sinners, inherently flawed, who can only gain access to Heaven through adherence to rules and regulations and the acceptance of a moral value system. Undermining this value system in “Sister Benvenuta,” Lee proposes a cultivation of aesthetic Ideal in its stead.

Yet the relationship between Sister Benvenuta and the Christ doll which evokes the Ideal and figures it as a replacement for Christianity is delivered to the reader in a form which threatens to call this reading into question. The child figure’s relationship to art is bound up in the world of childhood and its ability to understand and access art in a way lost to the adult mind. This connection is one of immediacy, of an understanding that is as yet unencumbered by the confusion and limitations of language. The child’s extra-linguistic space affords it kinship with art, a bond which is lost as the child becomes adult and loses itself in the limitations of language. And yet, “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child” is an epistolary narrative, which forces the reader to see Sister Benvenuta writing, to recognise her as a being fully

enveloped in language.

It would seem that, because of the lack of immediacy inherent in the written word, Sister Benvenuta's letters exclude her from the child's space, that which is essential to the child's ability to see the Ideal, to live in the world of art and Beauty. And yet, this is not really the case: Honeyman notes that "the concept of childhood has been defined by adult discourse as that which cannot engage adult discourse... The position of childhood is typically constructed as prelapsarian, relatively preverbal, outside empowered discourse, unsophisticated, unknowing, irrational—the very opposite of... 'adulthood'" (4). Certainly Sister Benvenuta is constructed in line with most of these conditions of the extralinguistic child. Her relationship with the inanimate Christ Child doll is deeply suggestive of a prelapsarian innocence, and is undoubtedly seen by the other nuns in the convent, specifically Sister Sacristan, as irrational. Furthermore, Sister Benvenuta's simplicity is often referred to, suggesting that she is seen by others as unsophisticated and unknowing. But Honeyman's decision to include "preverbal" and "outside empowered discourse", placing the two side-by-side, is intriguing. None of the other constructions of childhood specifically preclude language. However, she does mitigate the impact of the word "preverbal," deeming the child only "relatively" so. This raises an important point with regards to children's as extra-linguistic: as MacDonald's Diamond clearly demonstrates in *At the Back of the North Wind*, which I will discuss in the next chapter, the child's relationship to language is tenuous. They are very quickly initiated into language, and yet this does not deprive them of their status as child. Children can only be constructed as preverbal relative to an adult understanding of language: they are extra-linguistic the metaphorical sense, outside empowered discourse.

In order to understand Sister Benvenuta as a linguistic being who remains "outside empowered discourse", we must consider the way in which she is

constructed in opposition to an institution which is defined by its association with language as an “empowered discourse”, in this case Catholicism. Sister Benvenuta rejects the natural development into proper adulthood - she resists socialisation in a world of language and the Law, creating instead her own world around the Christ Child. Whilst not preverbal in the most literal sense, she gradually moves away from language as she moves towards the realm of Lee’s aesthetic Ideal, as I will explore further on. In addition, by placing Sister Benvenuta in a convent, Lee silently surrounds her with Christian discourse: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*New Revised Standard Version Bible*, John 1:1). Sister Benvenuta, as the child figure associated with an aesthetic world, is excluded from the “Word of God”, and therefore from the empowered discourse of the adult space around her. Her exclusion is indicated not only by her conflict with Sister Sacristan, but by her failure to truly engage with Christian doctrine: she confesses that she does not fear the devil (Lee, “Benvenuta” 5), and in her Faustian encounter admits having “never crossed [her]self nor ejaculated any form of exorcism” (11). In MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, Diamond demonstrates a failure to fully participate within the structures of adult discourse; Sister Benvenuta’s cursory engagement with Catholicism is a similar failure, and as with Diamond it signifies her exclusion from adult discourse. She comes to occupy her own space within the convent, an aesthetic sphere set outside of Christian discourse; this space accords her the same qualities as the child, the same access to and understanding of the statue world, which enable her to see the Ideal. More importantly, Sister Benvenuta’s engagement with language decreases as the text progresses: she gradually retreats into silence until she relinquishes the narrative voice altogether.

The first signs of Sister Benvenuta’s eventual withdrawal from language

appear during her interaction with the Devil: his seduction, based in his manipulation of language, has no impact on the extra-linguistic child figure. Yet her very first encounter with “Beelzebubb Satanasso”, the puppet representing the Devil, which takes place early in the text, foreshadows this defeat, positioning Sister Benvenuta as already immune to the Devil’s influence:

There was one which made me burst out laughing, till I nearly cried; and it was very foolish and wrong, as Sister Grimana told me, for I knew the whole time that puppet represented the Devil. I have never been afraid of the Devil, I who am afraid of so many things... I know it is wrong, and I have often prayed that I might learn to fear the Evil One, but I never could, and all the pictures of him, and the things they tell... have always made me laugh... But oh, dear Bambino, you would have laughed also! (Lee, “Benvenuta” 5-6)

Sister Benvenuta once again fails to engage with conventional Christian discourse, an exclusion she herself emphasises. Furthermore, as she embodies the ultimate purity and innocence that Lee attributes to the child, Sister Benvenuta can see only beauty and goodness in the world, and the Devil therefore does not pose any threat to her.

The unique vision which enables her to see the Ideal when others cannot also allows her to enter into a deal with the Devil with a calculation out of character with a woman who is otherwise so childish. Sister Benvenuta’s Satanic encounter is detailed in two letters that she states she “shall not put... into the silver arm in the Sacristy cupboard” (10). These letters reveal a slightly different side to Sister Benvenuta, yet this revelation only serves to add nuance to her character, demonstrating a rationality that tallies with Lee’s discussions of childhood intellect elsewhere. Sister Benvenuta calls upon the Devil in order to obtain a coat for the Child Christ, being unable to make one for him herself. She says of this act that she is paying “the only price worthy of being paid to please Him: the price of a soul, very foolish and simple no doubt, but full as a grape is of sweetness, or a rose of perfume, of unmixed love and devotion” (10). In this preface to the deal itself, Sister

Benvenuta reveals a logic that would be sacrilegious to a mind such as Sister Sacristan's: she counts her immortal soul "foolish and simple," a payment only rendered acceptable by her love and devotion. The paradoxical nature of her intention – making a request of the Devil in order to serve Christ with devotion and love – is immediately clear, and her interaction with the Devil is again different from that which we would expect of a more experienced mind. She describes the scene as follows:

I laughed; but as I did so I felt my breath quite cold, and my cut hair, under my cap, prick and grow stiff. It seemed endless till he spoke, and when he did, with a Jew's harp voice like a mask's, and called me by my name, I felt suddenly relieved, my heart released and quite calm. He asked me whether I knew who he was, and pointed to a label over his shoulder, with written on it: "Beelzebubb Satanasso, Prince of all Devils." He seemed rather hard of understanding and given to unnecessary explanations and provisos, but uncommon civil spoken, and used a number of very long words, of which he declared the meaning as he went along... I never crossed myself nor ejaculated any form of exorcism, because, you see, I had told him to come, and it was a piece of business. (11)

Certain aspects of Sister Benvenuta's encounter appear at odds with what the reader might expect from an interaction with the Devil: once again she laughs at him. But even more peculiar is her description of his speech, which she finds difficult to understand. Satan is depicted in the Bible, and often literature,¹⁵ as a tempter, and therefore his strength should be in his words and their ability to seduce the listener into agreeing to a pact regardless of the severity of the consequences. However, Sister Benvenuta is not tempted; in fact, his speech becomes almost meaningless to her, mere gibberish composed of explanations and provisos and very long words.

Sister Benvenuta is immune to the Devil's words because she is not fully a

¹⁵ Although the pact that Sister Benvenuta makes is a Faustian one, the fact that Lee's puppet is called "Beelzebubb Satanasso" suggests that he presents stronger allusion to Milton's Satan – whose first lieutenant was Beelzebub – than to either Marlowe's or Goethe's Mephistopheles. This may account for the references to his language, as Satan's use of words is his defining characteristic. John Leonard notes that in *Paradise Lost* Satan points to his own powerful use of language as a means of temptation, that he "speaks specifically about his speaking and attributes this supposedly new power to some as yet unspecified fruit" (141).

part of his world, one constructed with and defined by language. The world of the Devil is also that of Christianity: he is a part of that discourse from which Sister Benvenuta is excluded, and as such the power of his words is lost on her.

Furthermore, although the event may not initially appear as such, Sister Benvenuta's interaction with the Devil is, in fact, a progression further away from the convent and the limitations of Christianity embodied therein, and deeper into her own aesthetic space. In her final letter to the Christ Child, she reflects that she is, "living through bits of [her life] all at once, as the old lay sister says she did when she fell into the river Natisone and thought to be drowned" (11-2). This letter suggests that Sister Benvenuta is fully aware of some inevitable and ultimately fatal consequence of her agreement with the Devil. This deal, therefore, is a conscious and deliberate sacrifice on her part for the Christ Child doll, and more significantly, for the world of art that he represents: for the Ideal. This sacrifice, although enacted within the understanding of Christian discourse, pulls her further outside of the Christian world, and outside the world of language itself. Significantly, the letter following Sister Benvenuta's deal with the Devil, in which she describes her childhood self, is the last written by her; the next voice the reader encounters is that of her cousin, Sister Atalanta Badoer, who describes the circumstances surrounding Sister Benvenuta's death. As the Devil's words lose meaning and turn into gibberish, Sister Benvenuta releases her last hold on language and Christianity and ascends into silence.

The change in narrator is not only significant because it facilitates Sister Benvenuta's silence: it further serves to underline the opposition between the Christian space and the aesthetic. On Christmas Eve, Sister Atalanta recalls being sent to look after Sister Benvenuta when she is missing from the Mass of Midnight, since Sister Benvenuta had been growing ill. What she finds upon reaching Sister Benvenuta's cell is worth quoting in full:

I noticed a very brilliant light streaming from under the door. It seemed to me also that I heard voices and sounds, which filled me with astonishment. I stopped and knocked, calling on Sister Benvenuta, but getting no answer. Meanwhile, those sounds were quite clear and unmistakable, and were, in fact, such as mothers and nurses make while rocking and embracing young children, and broken with loving exclamations and kissings... The cell was streaming with light, as of hundreds of tapers; and in the midst of it, the centre of this fountain of radiance, was seated Sister Benvenuta, and on her knees, erect, stood no other but the Child Christ. He had a little naked foot on each of her knees, and was craning His little bare body to reach her face, and seeking to throw His little arms round her neck, and raise His little mouth to hers. And the Blessed Benvenuta clasped Him most gently, as if fearing to crush His small limbs; and they kissed and uttered sounds which were not human words, but like those of doves, and full of divine significance. Now when I saw this sight and heard these sounds, my knees were loosened; I dropped silently on the ground, my eyes blinded by glory, my lips vainly trying to pray; time seemed to come to a stand-still. (15)

When Sister Atalanta recovers, she finds that Sister Benvenuta is seated as Sister Atalanta had seen her, but that she is in fact clutching the Christ Child doll and a beautiful gold and silver garment: “And Sister Benvenuta’s mouth and eyes were open with rapture. And she was stone dead and already cold” (16). This death scene attests to the power that the child holds in Lee’s texts, precisely because it is not a death scene. Through the eyes of Sister Atalanta the reader catches a glimpse of Sister Benvenuta as her spirit ascends; the vision of “the Blessed Benvenuta” and the Christ Child enveloped in a “fountain of radiance” cements the idea of the transcendent child which is only found in fragmentary form in Lee’s other texts. Despite being “stone dead and already cold” in reality, the rapture on Sister Benvenuta’s face carries connotations of being transported, both emotionally and literally. The word “rapture” is derived from an old French word meaning to be carried away, and has therefore become connected with the Christian belief in an ascension during which the saved will meet Christ upon his return to Earth. The Christian context in the final paragraphs of the text is not only clear, it is incredibly heavy-handed, to the point even of mockery; surely this stands at odds with the

previous opposition, even battle, between the aesthetic Sister Benvenuta and the blind and limited Christian world?

It is here that the change in narrator becomes significant. Lee places the text in the hands of someone else, someone fully established within the adult, Christian, linguistic space from which Sister Benvenuta had been separated. The extensive Christian imagery and the overwrought nature of the description itself becomes, in this passage, parodic, undermining the legitimacy of the Christian interpretation. Through her depiction of such a customarily Christian event – a dazzling rapture in union with the Christ Child – the traditional religious standpoint is rejected, and the aesthetic values of Sister Benvenuta stand triumphant. Furthermore, the description of Sister Benvenuta's rapture is delivered through the pen of Sister Atalanta, a fellow nun; although Sister Benvenuta has been placed in opposition with the religious structure of the convent, outside of its discourse, Sister Atalanta has not. Her narrative, therefore, is influenced by her religious perspective. Whether the Christian imagery in the passage is read as parody or a distortion imprinted upon the event by the narrator, it severely undermines the authority of a Christian concept of transcendence. And although her ascension itself is certainly not intended as a Biblical rapture, the importance of the secondary meaning, of being carried away, still stands: it suggests that Sister Benvenuta has been lifted beyond – or above – Death.

Sister Benvenuta's transcendence occurs in a space that is almost completely removed from the Christian world in which the story itself is set: initially Sister Atalanta is privileged only to glimpse light streaming from behind closed doors. When she does finally force herself to open the door, she is incapable of entering the aesthetic space itself: "I...very gently lifted the latch and opened the door. But I immediately fell on my knees on the threshold, unable to stir or even to utter a sound

for the wonder and glory of what met my poor sinner's eyes" (15). The vision that Sister Atalanta has of the animated Christ doll on Sister Benvenuta's knee suggests that this radiant rapture has taken place in the fusion of the aesthetic statue world – to which the puppets and dolls belong – and the child's. Even Sister Benvenuta's silence, her complete removal from the sphere of language, becomes, according to Gullon, a kind of space: "Transcending the sensorial, but benefiting from it, silence constitutes itself in an impregnating substance; because of the subtlety of its action, insidious; because of the persistence of its permanence, invulnerable. These expressions... suggest that silence is not an instrument of the narrator but a reality in which he and the characters find themselves." This silent space is not, Gullon points out, "hollow spaces", but rather "elements complementary to the verbal construct" (17).

Sister Atalanta, left mired in language – which cannot fully comprehend what she is seeing – is given the task of narrating, supplying the verbal construct by which Sister Benvenuta's silent space speaks. Yet she and the adult world to which she belongs are physically barred from entering the sphere in which Sister Benvenuta's transcendence takes place. She is allowed only to glimpse it, calling to mind Lee's description of "snatch[ing] a sight of the Ideal" (Lee, "Christkindchen" 187). Sister Benvenuta has progressed beyond simply catching sight of the Ideal to fully integrating with it, realising the child figure's potential to fully live within the world of art, experiencing true Beauty immediately, without the barriers provided by mediating factors such as morality, religion, or even language. Behind her she leaves her cousin, trapped with the reader in an adult world, having only gazed briefly at the Ideal from which she is denied.

It should be noted that in "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child", Lee creates a temporal disruption not entirely dissimilar to, but yet again not quite the same as,

Pater's in "The Child in the House" and "Emerald Uthwart". As a child-like adult, Sister Benvenuta becomes a physical representation of an enduring child-self, somewhat like that imagined by Pater. However, rather than embodying a return to one's childhood, Sister Benvenuta suggests the refusal of childhood itself to die. In her, childhood has lingered – she does not develop, does not progress. She remains static until her ascension. In Sister Benvenuta, then, Lee constructs not only a child figure who does not die, but a childhood which remains. Unlike Henry James, whose exploration of a childhood that does not die considers its inherently horrific potential, Lee depicts it positively. Sister Benvenuta's lingering state of childhood is mocked and misunderstood by the adults around her, yet it is this state which enables her ascension. The rapture itself constitutes a fusion of life and death, in which the two occur simultaneously. In the radiant moment which marks Sister Benvenuta's death, Sister Atalanta describes the Christ Child, "craning His little bare body to reach her face, and seeking to throw His little arms around her neck, and raise His little mouth to hers" (15). Sister Benvenuta's transcendence brings the inanimate doll to life in the moment of her death, a transformation which constructs both figures as neither living nor dead like the statue-demons in "The Child in the Vatican". The association between this synthesis of life and death and the liminal statue world grounds Sister Benvenuta's ascension in the aesthetic Ideal which is an intrinsic part of aesthetic spaces in both texts.

Sister Benvenuta's transcendence hinges on the child figure's innocence, immediate access to Beauty, and purity of passion which enables it to see the Ideal with ease, and which associates the child with an aesthetic world. The child thus constructed is capable of overcoming temptation, evil, and ugliness. Although Lee may state that the child figure is unaware of such things in the world around it, she does not equate freedom from such knowledge with ignorance; instead she accords it

power. When the child figure is forced into an encounter with these things which it does not recognise, it is not defeated: lying next to Sister Benvenuta's is "a bearded and horned figure, with hoofs, labelled "Beelzebubb Satanasso"... its wires [...] wrenched and twisted, its articulated jaw crushed to bits, and its garments singed all round it" (16). Sister Benvenuta's aestheticism violently rips apart a definitive figure of the religious institution to which it is opposed. Although Beelzebubb Satanasso is a puppet like those which mark Sister Benvenuta's integration with a world of aesthetic values rather than the Catholic values of the convent she physically inhabits, like the Christ Child doll it constitutes a blending of those two worlds. Yet it is contrasted with the silent Christ doll in its active engagement with Christian discourse, however tangentially. The puppet Devil actively fills the Satanic role that it is delegated according to Christian dogma, that of tempter, and of enemy. By leaving this mangled puppet behind after Sister Benvenuta's transformation, Lee figuratively destroys the connection between art, religion, and the moral good, privileging instead the pure aesthetic which Sister Benvenuta can perceive, and in the end comes to embody, as that which allows mortal humanity to briefly touch that which is immortal, and by doing so, to transcend death.

Like "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child", "Christkindchen" and "The Child in the Vatican" construct a space around the child figure in the states of transition, in the gaps between living and death, waking and sleeping, earth and beyond. These spaces also serve as a connection between the reader's reality – the constructed spaces of the Vatican, Rome, the convent – and the mysterious world of dreams and non-death, a world that streams with dazzling light and yet is filled with shadowy sculptures. The child figure links the real world of transitory-yet-eternal living beauty with the aesthetic world of art that immortalises it. The qualities that allow the child to occupy a state that touches both mortal, cyclical life and

immortality are repeated throughout each of the three texts: the child's innocence, passion of feeling, purity of perception, freedom of mind, and openness to immediate impression create in it a being that is "like unto" art itself.

The child figure is open to truly experiencing and loving art in a way that has been denied its adult counterpart by the imposition of limiting structures – language, experience, logic, religion – which blind it to anything but a rare glimpse of the aesthetic good, of that which Lee calls the Ideal. The child's ability to more freely see the Ideal in art – in all art, no matter how rough or simple – is forms the basis for a new kind of education, an aesthetic education by which the child is encouraged to nurture its initial kinship with a world of beauty, cultivating a love for art of all forms. The limitations that come with adulthood would certainly not be eradicated with this education, but would alter adults' relationship with art, transforming it from one of study to a stronger and more perceptive love of art. This new understanding of aesthetics, a closer appreciation of the Ideal, is deliberately situated within worlds steeped in religious meaning, placing the aesthetic Ideal in opposition to a religious morality which Lee perceives as a threat to the aesthetic good. Finally, the scattered images of immortality in "Christkindchen" and "The Child in the Vatican" culminate in "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child" in a miraculous transcendence of the child figure in a space of brilliant aestheticism, an ascension beyond death constructed using the very paradigm of the religious institution the texts seek to undermine.

Through the coalescence of worlds around the child figure, Lee constructs an image of adult self-hood that embraces, rather than hinders, a deeper understanding of art and beauty. She contrasts this state of being with religious devotion, proposing the aesthetic Ideal as a superior path to immortality: to see the Ideal is to place oneself within an eternal world of art and thus transcend death, if only momentarily. Yet while Lee situates the child figure at the heart of an opposition between

aestheticism and religious morality, George MacDonald incorporates the same unique perspective, the same extra-linguistic qualities in his construction of a child figure which binds aestheticism and spirituality so completely that they become indistinguishable. Through his divine aesthetic child figures, MacDonald mediates his own tortured spiritual anxiety through a confusion of life and death.

Sitting on the Doorstep:

The Divine Aesthetic Child in George MacDonald

“The mirror has lifted [the room] out of the region of fact into the realm of art... But is it not that art... reveals Nature in some degrees as she really is, and as she represents herself to the eye of the child?”¹⁶

George MacDonald’s theological views of children and child-like qualities are no secret: not only scholars, but casual readers of his work – his fantasy stories and novels in particular – are immediately presented with an unmistakable idealisation of the essence of childhood embodied in his protagonists (child and adult alike) and his vision of the divine. His perspective is stated baldly in the first volume of *Unspoken Sermons*, in the tract entitled “The Child in the Midst”: “For the *childlike* is the divine, and the very word ‘marshals me the way that I was going’” (3). Similarly, MacDonald takes no pains to mask his fervent belief that the realities of everyday life are more akin to states of death or slumber than death itself is, and that we must submit to “die out of death into life” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 196).

The vision MacDonald crafts of a death which is to be accepted, even welcomed, as a truer form of life, as the waking reality to which our own experiences are but a dream, is carried throughout *Phantastes* (1858), *At the Back of the North*

¹⁶ MacDonald, *Phantastes* 154-5.

Wind (1871) and *Lilith* (1895). His place in a discussion of the relationship between the child figure and a re-conception of death does not, therefore, come as a surprise. Superficial similarities in Pater's and MacDonald's associations of the child figure to the act of dying, and experience of death suggest a shared vision of the immortal child; however, the more complex elements of MacDonald's construction of the child figure stand in contrast to such a comparison. To read MacDonald's child figure purely in light of Pater's would offer little in the way of a greater understanding of either his work or the role that the child figure plays therein. However, I do hope to capitalise on one aspect of this similarity by exploring the child figure in light of MacDonald's union of aestheticism and (primarily) Christian spirituality and by considering the potential influence of Victorian concepts of the child's mind. Such an approach will lead to a greater understanding of the fantastic worlds for which MacDonald is remembered, and his vision not only of death but also of life which never could quite meet with any established religious doctrine. Most importantly, it will reveal the complexity of the child figure's role in the intersection of aestheticism and spirituality in two of his major fantasy novels, *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *Lilith*.

I am particularly interested in the construction and representation of child figures in these two novels rather than in *Lilith* and *Phantastes*, despite the critical tendency to advance *Lilith* as a kind of sequel to *Phantastes*. That said, *Phantastes* offers some early professions with regards to MacDonald's perspectives on art and beauty which are fundamental to a reading of his later fantasies. Keeping this in mind, I intend to explore the way in which the child figure in *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith* interacts with, even intertwines with, their creation of fantastic worlds. Looking to Shuttleworth's *The Mind of the Child* I will analyse the nature of these worlds with regards to Victorian conceptions of and anxieties about

children's psychological state, uncovering the significance both of their aestheticism and their similarity to common Victorian understandings of the state of childhood.

MacDonald's fantasy worlds are closely associated with the importance of music and non-verbal communication, characteristics with which he also imbues his literary children, and which, as I have discussed previously with regards to the work of Vernon Lee, relate closely to aesthetic concepts of art and beauty. However, in MacDonald, these elements are also significant with regards to spirituality.

MacDonald's location of his child figures within fantastic aesthetic worlds seems to be result from tortured duality of feeling towards his own theology which Colin Manlove suggests is carried through both his fantastic and realistic fiction. The child figure thus becomes a way for MacDonald to work through his own theological anxieties regarding the reality of everyday life and the promise of a heavenly life after death. The child's aesthetic divinity is woven into MacDonald's fantastic worlds, and these worlds are constructed as part of a continuum that encompasses the child mind, sleep, and death. Envisioning the child's divinity as a union of humanity and divinity, MacDonald attempts to capitalise on the child's potential to mediate the gap between life and death, although whether or not such mediation is successful is left unclear.

Because of the centrality of the "essential child" and a childlike nature to MacDonald's fiction and theological discussions, several scholars have considered the way that children are represented in his fantasy stories.¹⁷ For some, like George Landow, MacDonald's emphasis on children, and in particular his representations of children and death, offer nothing more than an attempt to "convey Christian ideas of the afterlife... [and] console parents and prepare children for an early death by

¹⁷ See Reynolds' "Fatal Fantasies: the Death of Children in Victorian and Edwardian Fantasy Writing", Manlove's "A Reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*" (51-78); Pennington's "The 'Childish Imagination' of John Ruskin and George MacDonald: Introductory Speculations" (55-65), and Wood's "Suffer the Children: The Problem of the Loving Father in *At the Back of the North Wind*" (112-119).

removing its terrors” (140). Kimberley Reynolds, on the other hand, offers a more disturbing interpretation of the role of child-death in Victorian fantasy, wondering whether “for some readers part of their appeal (significantly, at least in the late twentieth century, these fantasies are more popular with adults than children) lies in their ability to explore, without being seen to do so, the ultimate taboo – *desiring* the death of children?” (176). Naomi Wood, in her exploration of father figures in *At the Back of the North Wind*, sees the child as “an object of desire, but this is not designed to give power to the child reader” (118). She also notes that in this novel, at least, if not in MacDonald’s body of work as a whole, or indeed in many late-nineteenth century texts, “to be childlike is to be submissive” (113). Yet most of these studies are content to accept that MacDonald’s child figures constitute nothing more than individual fictional embodiments of what Glenn Edward Sadler refers to as MacDonald’s vision of “the cosmic role of the child, who as a redemptive figure participates in and exemplifies universal love and immortality” (5).

Given that MacDonald himself stated that “when [Christ] tells [the disciples] to receive *such* a little child in his name, it must surely imply something in common between them all... Jesus and the child are one... the child is like Jesus, or rather, that the Lord is like the child, and may be embraced, yea, is embraced, by every heart childlike enough to embrace a child for the sake of his blessings” (17), it seems to have been generally decided that such was the role of the child figure in his fictional works, and nothing more. However, the Victorian exploration of the enigmatic depths of the child mind detailed in Shuttleworth’s *The Mind of the Child* suggests that the child figure in MacDonald’s fantasy stories, and the fantastic worlds which they so vividly depict, may well be a product or reflection of the anxieties and ideas about the child mind that abounded during the nineteenth century. As Shuttleworth makes clear, literary and medical or psychological studies were mutually influential in the

understanding of children's psyche in the nineteenth century. Unlike Pater, whose child spaces are marked as such by their association with the childhood home, and Lee, who construct spaces to which the child alone has access, MacDonald's fantasy worlds are constructed according to characteristics of the child mind, and it is this construction that identifies them as child spaces. Of course, theology is still essential element of MacDonald's child figures; his central child characters are described as divine in both *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith*, not to mention elsewhere in his fiction and his *Unspoken Sermons*. However, to reduce the child's importance to its theological dimension is to ignore his role in the literary creation of fantasy worlds, in representations of death, and in MacDonald's often overlooked aestheticism.

Due to MacDonald's place in the development of modern fantasy literature, and, as Yuri Cowan points out in "Allegory and Aestheticism in the Fantasies of George MacDonald", to the influence of early interpretations of MacDonald by G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, he has tended to be confined to the category of a "mythopoeic" or a "fantasy" writer. Chesterton, in his introduction to Greville MacDonald's biography of his father, wrote that "George MacDonald did really believe that people were goblins or good fairies, and he dressed them up as men and women. The fairy-tale was the inside of the ordinary story and not the outside... The novels as novels are uneven, but as fairy-tales they are extraordinarily consistent" (11-2). Many discussions of MacDonald's fiction have also been concerned with their theological framework, such as David Robb's *God's Fiction: Symbolism and Allegory in the Works of George MacDonald* (1987), in which Robb asserts that "everything [MacDonald] wrote was filled with his sense of God, and with what he believed to be the truth about God and God's creation" (20). Such definitions have led to a lack of discussions of his work in relation to the many literary and artistic

movements with which he would have come into contact during his many decades of writing, and there have been few attempts to explore the extent to which MacDonald was influenced by or engaged with such movements. Cowan associates MacDonald's work with aestheticism, while Adelheid Kegler is quick to assert his potential ties to symbolism. These two perspectives aside, however, most MacDonald criticism is interested in his work as it engages with the fantasy genre or Christian theology.

Cowan is convinced that such exclusionary approaches have had a detrimental effect on a more nuanced understanding of MacDonald's work: "To see MacDonald as a shaper of Christian myths is to ignore both the non-dogmatic nature of his views on moral and social renewal and the emphasis on individual interpretation that colours his views on art, both of which are characteristic of the concerns of the Aesthetic movement in general" (39). To this statement I would add the qualifier "purely": to purely read MacDonald in light of his relationship to the genre of British fantasy literature or his development of Christian myths is to negate the elements of his fiction that engage with other literary – even theological – influences. To overlook these influences, which add crucial richness and intensity, as well as philosophical depth to MacDonald's fantasies, is to approach these stories from a narrow position profoundly opposed to MacDonald's own. For George MacDonald, despite the strength of his religious convictions, was a man whose experience of the world around him was constantly being influenced by different facets of society, of religion, of life. It therefore stands to reason that, just as his spiritual beliefs were influenced by his experiences¹⁸ – to such an extent that his own theology often came into conflict with Calvinist dogma¹⁹ – so his literary efforts

¹⁸ See Richard Reis, *George MacDonald* 31-51; see also Greville MacDonald's *George MacDonald and His Wife* and William Raeper's *George MacDonald*, which both explore the ties between MacDonald's experiences and influences and his theological development through his own letters.

¹⁹ Greville MacDonald, in *George MacDonald and His Wife*, describes his father's dismissal from the congregation at Arundel as stemming from such conflict; one of the charges raised against him on this matter, Greville suspects, "probably originated in his *Songs of Novalis*: he was tainted with German Theology" (178-9); see also David Robb's *God's Fiction: Symbolism and Allegory in the Works of George MacDonald* (6-7, 11-13, 17).

might similarly exhibit the imprint of the movements in literature around him.

There is the danger, in summarising George MacDonald's fantasy, that the summary may prove no shorter than the text itself: both *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith* are episodic, the former especially so. *North Wind* is constructed not only of episodes describing the adventures of its hero, the young Diamond, but also of multiple dream-state episodes, nursery rhyme poems, and a short embedded fairy-tale, while *Lilith*'s overarching cyclical structure complicates any consideration of its various episodes. As a result, much like Pater's "Child in the House" and "Emerald Uthwart", and Lee's "Sister Benvenuta", neither text contains a linearly progressing narrative. Any sense of forward progression is undermined by the fragmented narrative and the lack of a traditional "plot" structure in which conflicts are presented and overcome in a motion towards a satisfactory conclusion. In a sense, both narratives are blowing with the wind – while the wind might continually blow them west they are not necessarily headed that way due to any intentional design.

At the Back of the North Wind follows Diamond, a coachman's young son named after the coachman's reliable old horse, beginning with his series of fantastic night-time travels with the personified North Wind,²⁰ here a beautiful and mysterious lady. During one such adventure, while visiting his Aunt in Sandwich, Diamond travels to the country at the back of the north wind, a land of beauty and song; upon "returning" he discovers that he has just awoken from a coma and that while he has been sleeping his father has lost his situation as a coachman. The family moves to London, where his father becomes a cab-driver, a vocation which Diamond himself takes up to support his family during his father's temporary illness. The rest of the story revolves around Diamond's experiences in London as he attempts to improve the lives of the people around him. His father once again finds a position as a

²⁰ For the purposes of this analysis I will capitalise North Wind when referring to the anthropomorphised character with whom Diamond interacts and in the title of the novel itself; for all other instances I will use lower case.

coachman, and it is after the family has recovered their situation that Diamond again begins to see North Wind. His adventures with her signal the return of his earlier illness; shortly thereafter Diamond dies, although according to the narrator he has merely returned to the land at the back of the north wind.

Although *Lilith* is written in a more mature voice and is therefore seemingly intended for a more mature audience than *At the Back of the North Wind*, it contains just as much, if not more, fantasy and whimsy as the latter. *Lilith*'s so-called 'hero' is the magnificently passive Mr. Vane, who travels through a mirror in his garret to a mysterious dimension on the other side while pursuing the mysterious "Mr. Raven" (who later reveals himself to be Adam). Despite being thrust back into his own world on more than one occasion, Vane nevertheless travels through the land on the other side of the mirror for some time, where he befriends the Lovers – a band of young children who never mature or age – and the eponymous Lilith. During his largely aimless rambles throughout the country, Vane finds himself in the midst of a revolt, joining the Lovers as they attack Lilith's city of Bulika and capture its murderous queen. Vane witnesses to the attempts to free Lilith's soul from the Shadow to which she is wed, and after helping to return to the land the water which Lilith had gathered up for herself, Vane submits to sleep – to die – in Adam's graveyard, during which time he experiences a number of strange and fantastic dreams before finally "waking" into a new life.

Although he journeys with the Lovers to Mount Paradiso, glimpsing angels and flashes of Heaven, in the very last moment he finds that "a hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened; the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I stood alone in my library" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 237). The creation of fantastic paradises in both of these

texts, and in many of MacDonald's other fictional works, is one of their most marked, and consequently influential elements. It is largely because of these worlds that MacDonald is credited with being one of the founding fathers of modern fantasy literature. However, this influence has led to a limitation in the critical discussion about his fantastic texts, which are typically read in the context of the genre as it is now understood. However, particularly in relation to MacDonald's child figures, it is more constructive to consider these texts as engaged in a dialogue with some of the literary movements that characterised the period during which he wrote, in particular aestheticism.

In any scholarly discussion of literary aestheticism, MacDonald's work is not likely to be given much consideration; in fact, it is more probable that his name would not be mentioned at all. Yet, while he would never be classified as an aesthete, Cowan's essay clearly demonstrates the ways in which aestheticism's influence can be seen in MacDonald's fiction. If not engaging directly with the aesthetic movement, he was certainly touching on aspects of its fundamental beliefs. "The Aesthetic project," according to Cowan,

is one of continuing to receive impressions of art and to create new forms from them, and of absorbing them into one's life on a daily basis, thereby making one's character more refined and individual. If there is one agreement among the diverse writings of the Aesthetic movement, it lies in their desire to maintain the tension (or harmony) between the fictional and the actual, the real and the ideal, life and art. It is not 'the Truth' that will make us free, it is Art. (54)

While critics like Pater, Lee, or Ruskin²¹ wrote extensively on the nature of aesthetics, attempting, in Pater's words, to "distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced" (ix),

²¹ For a more specific discussion of Ruskin's relationship to British aestheticism, see Daley, "From the Theoretic to the Practical" 90-107. Iser also explores Pater's connection to Ruskin in *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment* 11-14, 26, 33-35, 47, and 63.

MacDonald's non-fiction prose took the form of spiritual sermons rather than traditional aesthetic criticism. And yet, those sermons as well as his fiction are laden with evidence that he, too, bore the trademark quality of the aesthetic critic: "not that [they] should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (Pater x).

There is, of course, a division between Pater's and Lee's art-for-art's-sake aestheticism and Ruskin's aesthetic theory which I have already touched on in the previous chapter. It is true that Ruskin's relationship to British aestheticism is a complicated one. The question becomes, as Freedman suggests, "of whom... do we speak when we refer to the 'aesthetic movement'?" (3) He goes on to concede that "the concept of aestheticism is appropriately derived from Pater's work. The values he upholds are fundamentally aesthetic"(5), but asserts that "aestheticism... represents primarily an angle of vision that aims at the purification of vision Ruskin sought but which increasingly discovers the impossibility of such preternatural clarity of sight; it privileges art not as an end in and of itself, but as a focusing or sharpening of the contradictions one thereby faces" (10). It is within this more general conceptualisation of nineteenth-century British aestheticism that I aim to situate MacDonald. Certainly MacDonald's prose, fictional and non-fictional alike, offers a reflection of the author as a man who cultivated a deeply sensitive appreciation for, even adoration of, beauty. But beyond this simplistic association, MacDonald demonstrates an affinity with Pater's description of the aesthetic critic, and his prose is characterised by the "focusing or sharpening of... contradictions" which Freedman describes as an essential defining quality of British aestheticism.

In direct contrast to Vernon Lee's overtly anti-religious – though not necessarily anti-spiritual – aestheticism, MacDonald's is predicated on the necessity

of a close relationship between the aesthetic and the spiritual. In fact, Rolland Hein's description of MacDonald's belief system describes them as intrinsically linked:

Today, many people who think about the relation of Christianity to art discern an incompatibility between them. They see art, by its very nature, as having to be free and unconstrained by dogma, and Christianity as arbitrary and confining. Such people would be quick to see MacDonald as a man torn between two worlds... [But] in MacDonald's system of belief nothing is more compatible, nothing is more unified in nature, intent, and purpose, than art and faith. As he states... 'Beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed'. (Hein 148-9)

The emphasis on a relationship between Christianity and art that Hein describes brings to mind Ruskin's aesthetic theory. MacDonald's son Greville MacDonald offers a glimpse of his father's close relationship with John Ruskin²², to whose description of the moral value of Art and Beauty Lee was so strongly opposed. The younger MacDonald takes pains to emphasise "how strong was the two men's sympathy. Different in temperament and endowment, neither was afraid of speaking plainly of their disagreements... it was done with a refinement of feeling seldom met with in those of blood-kinship" (330). As Roderick McGillis points out, MacDonald's letters to Ruskin reveal the extent of their personal relationship, but little of MacDonald's perspectives on his friend's intellectual or aesthetic position ("What's Missing" 283). That said, and despite the stark differences in their religious belief, MacDonald's fiction reveals an aesthetic theory of the relationship between art and moral value that is not unlike Ruskin's own. Ruskin specifically identified a distinction between the aesthetics of form and the expression of morality within art, his description of the "three great branches of architectural virtue" offering a clear picture of such a division: "(1.) That [art] act well, and do the things it was intended

²² For a more complete exploration of Ruskin's own conception of and relationship with children, see Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (94-128). Her description of "Ruskin's conception of the vital yet circumscribed childhood" as finding "representation not only in his crystalline prose, but also in a rippling book – no natural, uncontrollable torrent this but a constructed and contained stream which courses, under his control, over an artificial bed of quartz" (126) carries intriguing notes of MacDonald's own engagement with children and water, which I shall explore in detail later in this chapter.

to do in the best way. (2.) That it speak well, and say the things it was intended to say in the best words. (3.) That it look well, and please us by its presence, whatever it has to do or say” (*Stones* 60). In MacDonald’s aesthetic philosophy, however, spirituality does not imbue Art or Beauty with a value it might otherwise have lacked. They are, to repeat Hein’s phrasing, intrinsically “unified in nature, intent, and purpose”.

It could be argued, therefore, that Lee’s and MacDonald’s aestheticism are as two sides of the same mirror – where Lee idealises art for art’s sake, and not its moral or spiritual value, MacDonald similarly constructs a vision of art and beauty in which there is no spiritual value because art *is* spirituality. Lee reacts against Ruskin’s evaluation of Art based on its moral value, its service to a particularly religious morality; MacDonald might react against the same method of evaluation, but because the very essence, the nature, of all art – of beauty itself – is divine. Indeed, it is entirely possible that both Lee and MacDonald would have agreed upon this conception of aestheticism, given that Lee’s quarrel was not with spirituality or faith as such, but with what she perceived to be the irrational limitations of organised religion. Despite the fact that MacDonald was undoubtedly a deeply religious man, his faith did not conform entirely to religious dogma, and his union of the aesthetic and the divine seems to grow from spirituality broadly defined rather than any from specific religious institution. It is this aestheticism which colours his fantasies, specifically his creation of fantastic worlds.

I have discussed previously the way in which Vernon Lee, and to some extent Walter Pater, crafted aesthetic realms which were intrinsically bound to the child figure. In *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith*, MacDonald takes this technique to a new level, turning to the style and philosophy of the German Romantic literature by which he was so inspired – as Richard Reis notes, it was one of “the most profound and permanent influences upon MacDonald’s own works” (22) – to explore

and articulate his spiritual vision. Reis also notes that “if [MacDonald] had not found an artistic model for his symbolic fiction in the works of the German Romantics, he might never have written his few masterpieces” (138). The extent of this influence can be seen in the quotations taken from Novalis, whom MacDonald’s also translated with some zeal, which mark *The Portent* and *Phantastes* as well as *Lilith*; in “The Fantastic Imagination”, furthermore, he proclaims that “of all the fairy tales I know, I think *Undine* the most beautiful” (“Imagination” 65). However, MacDonald’s fantastic novels do not simply articulate a spiritual vision; they also allow him to sculpt a world made wonderful by his own unique aestheticism which converges on the child figure and the divinity of its child-like essence.

MacDonald’s construction of aesthetic paradises that are defined by their child-like characteristics constitutes an attempt to mediate his anxiety about the reality of life on earth and the prospect of life after death. His explicit reference to the act of dying “out of death into life” confuses the fundamental binary of life and death on which a definition of death as a finite end to the linear progression of life is based. This confusion suggests a rather dark vision of life as a state of living death, one which Robb describes as “lifeless and dull”, and sets the heavenly paradise at a torturous distance. By investing the child figure with an aesthetic divinity, and constructing fantastic worlds, themselves shades of heaven, that are founded on childish characteristics, MacDonald attempts to embrace the child as a means of bridging the indomitable gap between death’s promised paradise and the dreary reality of life. However, both *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith* demonstrate the failure of this attempted mediation as both Vane and the narrator in *North Wind* are denied access at the gates of heaven: adults may enter child-like fantasy worlds temporarily, but in the end they are condemned, as MacDonald himself is condemned, to the unchanging limbo of everyday life.

i. Through the Mirror: Aesthetic Fantasy Worlds

Despite a gap between *Phantastes* and *Lilith* of nearly half a century, the two are frequently seen as sequential given the deep similarities in style, form, and theme. Because of their affinity, it often helps to look to *Phantastes* to understand the rather more inscrutable *Lilith*. One prominent example of this relationship can be found in MacDonald's use of mirrors; they abound throughout his work, often functioning as portals as well as deeply symbolic images. *Lilith* is no exception: the vividly painted mirror hidden in the garret is the first doorway through which Mr. Vane steps into the fantastic realm of Mr. Raven. Yet, to fully understand the importance of this mirror and its role as gateway to another world, we must turn to the description of mirrors given by Cosmo von Wehrstahl in *Phantastes* forty-seven years earlier:

What a strange thing a mirror is! And what a wondrous affinity exists between it and a man's imagination! For this room of mine, as I beheld it in the glass, is the same, and yet not the same. It is not the mere representation of the room I live in, but looks just as if I were reading about it in a story I like. All its commonness has disappeared. *The mirror has lifted it out of the region of fact into the realm of art... But is it not that art... reveals Nature in some degrees as she really is, and as she represents herself to the eye of the child, whose every-day life, fearless and unambitious, meets the true import of the wonder teeming-world around him, and rejoices therein without questioning?*
(MacDonald, *Phantastes* 154-5, my emphasis)

Although there is no similar passage in *Lilith* exploring the role of mirrors in the transition between the mundane world and the realm of art, Mr. Vane's reaction to his situation after passing through the mirror in the garret echoes von Wehrstahl's earlier sentiment in *Phantastes*. Vane wonders whether he may have "wandered into a region where both the material and psychical relations of our world had ceased to hold? Might a man at any moment step beyond the realm of order" (*Lilith* 11): the 'realm of order' which he has left behind being no different from the 'region of fact'

which was transformed in the mirror in *Phantastes*.

The world in which Vane now finds himself may not be explicitly described as a realm of art, but the role that mirrors play in Vane's transition between reality and a place "so little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world – which we are apt to think the only world" (12) suggests an affinity with the mirror world in *Phantastes*. The similarities hints at *Lilith*'s construction of a fantasy world which is imprinted with MacDonald's aestheticism, as I shall explore below. In both worlds, Nature is unveiled 'as she really is', and, crucially, 'as she represents herself to the eye of the child'. This seeming truth of Nature barely corresponds with the mundane world constructed through the eyes of the adult, a world that is greyed and dulled by greed, ignorance, and cynicism. MacDonald's vision of an aesthetic world is – like Lee's – essentially defined by its accessibility to the eyes of a child. However, where Lee's spaces were vague, almost abstract in their lack of distinct definition, in *Lilith* especially MacDonald revels in the construction of detailed fantastic (aesthetic) spaces, and in the reader's apparent first-hand discovery of such worlds. It is true that in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the narrator does not enter the land at North Wind's back to which Diamond travels; in some respect this world is similar to Lee's child spaces in that it is only described, never experienced directly by either narrator or reader. But this distancing allows *North Wind* to convey a crucial characteristic of the eponymous world more effectively than *Lilith*: the narrator's exclusion from the land at the back of the north wind reveals the world's extra-linguistic qualities and their connection to the child figure.

When Diamond steps through North Wind herself to visit the country at her back, the narrator is quick to note the difficulty inherent in describing what he saw: "I have now come to the most difficult part of my story. And why? ... For of course I could know nothing about the story except Diamond had told it; and why should not

Diamond tell about the country at the back of the north wind, as well as about his adventures in getting there? Because, when he came back, he had forgotten a great deal, and what he did remember was very hard to tell” (93). It is interesting to note that there is some ambiguity as to whether it is Diamond who finds what he remembers difficult to tell, or whether it is the narrator who has trouble transcribing Diamond’s memories. In either case, it is clear that the land at the back of the north wind resists description: either Diamond or the narrator or both find it difficult to put it into words. The two authorities to which the narrator turns to supplement his own depiction seem either no more confident in their own accounts than he is, or else conflicted in their relation of key details.

The first of these sources, Durante – MacDonald’s thinly veiled reference to Dante – is, of course, an adult, notably the only adult voice to claim personal experience of the land itself. The other source is offered by Kilmeny, a young girl whose tale is passed on through the words of “a Scotch shepherd who died not forty years ago” (*North Wind* 93) – namely James Hogg. Although Diamond himself is a young child, the narrator is not, raising the question of whether it is only the adults who have difficulty conceptualising this paradise and not necessarily children. The only discrepancy between the three accounts, or at least the only one that the narrator points out, is found in Durante’s: “[Diamond’s] account disagreed with that of Durante, and agreed with that of Kilmeny, in this, that he protested there was no wind there at all. I fancy he missed it” (96).

It is interesting to note that the narrator, in his reference to Hogg’s “Kilmeny”, undermines the validity of the young girl’s tale, declaring that “it is clear, I think, that Kilmeny must have described the same country as Durante saw, though, not having his experience, she could neither understand nor describe it so well” (95). The suggestion that the young girl lacked the experience to properly understand what

she had gone through conflicts with MacDonald's own perspective on childhood, notably embodied in the character of Diamond, that it is precisely children's lack of lived experience which enables a deeper, purer understanding of what they see around them. Why then this contrasting statement with regards to Kilmeny? And why invest "Durante" with greater authority than the story's own central character whose words the narrator purports to be relaying? It could simply be due to MacDonald's admiration for Dante, whose *Divine Comedy* deeply influenced his fantasies²³; however, when it is revealed that Durante's description has some inaccuracies shortly after it is exalted as the pre-eminent account of the country at the back of the north wind, that authority is questioned, if not withdrawn. The narrator admits, as I have mentioned previously, that Diamond's account "agreed with that of Kilmeny", suggesting some sort of authority in numbers on behalf of the children's accounts.

Yet the narrator undermines the legitimacy of Kilmeny's description, and with it Diamond's, choosing instead to vet Durante's adult version of events immediately before they are called into question, and potentially even after the fact. His comment following the admission that Diamond's account agreed with Kilmeny's – "I fancy he missed it" – is curious. It indicates that the narrator is, once again, aligning himself with Durante's description, despite the fact that his account is in the minority. In so doing, he opens his own authority to suspicion, and that of the "Scotch shepherd" as well. Adults may find it difficult to phrase a description of the back of the north wind, but they will almost always trust the legitimacy of adult experience over a child's – even, apparently, when they are as sympathetic as the narrator in *At the Back of the North Wind* seems to be. This issue of allegiance and authority highlights

²³ See Gray's *Fantasy, Myth, and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald, and Hoffman*, Hein's "A Fresh Look at Lilith's Perplexing Dimensions," and Prickett's "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald" (14-23). All identify an attempt on MacDonald's part to emulate Dante's *Divine Comedy* in *Lilith*, and Giorgio Spina has explored the extent of Dante's significance to MacDonald in "The Influence of Dante on George MacDonald" (15-36).

the depth of the child's relationship to the fantastic worlds MacDonald creates. The children present a united front: each substantiates the other's description of the land at North Wind's back. That Durante differs suggests that his memory is even more fragile than Diamond's; the children are able to offer a clearer picture of the country at the back of the north wind. Furthermore, the struggle faced by the narrator in relating Diamond's account as he delivers it creates a division between the adults, who both have difficulty depicting the space, and the children, who may have forgotten much of their experience but are sure in what they do remember. The children's authority suggests that while the fantasy world at North Wind's back is not a space to which only children are allowed access, it is a world with which they have some affinity. It should be noted that this question of authority is one of only two instances in which the narrator undermines Diamond's account. Although throughout the rest of the novel the narrator is relatively sensitive – towards the end almost singularly so – to the truth in Diamond's unique perspective on life, in the two chapters that describe Diamond's travels to the back of the north wind he is curiously argumentative and abandons Diamond's child-view in favour of Durante's experience. The only other instance in which the narrator questions Diamond occurs in response to the boy's description of the world as a non-verbal space.

The first thing we are told about the country at the back of the north wind is that “the people there do not speak the same language for one thing. Indeed, Diamond insisted that they do not speak at all” (93). Despite Diamond's insistence – and throughout the story Diamond rarely ‘insists’ unless what he is insisting upon is, in fact, so – the narrator scoffs at this particular example of what he clearly sees to be childish fancy: “I do not think he was right, but it may well have appeared so to Diamond” (93). MacDonald's construction of the narrator here seems similar to James' in *Maisie* in that it offers an almost self-conscious mediation of the child's

experiences in order to draw attention to the effect of such a translation. However, whereas in *Maisie*, as we will see, the narrator is much more visibly involved in the text's construction and the reader's perception of the child figure, in *North Wind* the narrator remains largely passive in his engagement with Diamond's story.

MacDonald's narrator, almost without exception, dutifully relates the experiences and perspective of the novel's young hero with no suggestion of alteration or mediation, and, laying aside some of the issues surrounding the literary depiction of child figures that Honeyman might propose, there is no indication that the narrator has been set up as a voice to question elsewhere in the text. It is only here, in the description of the land at the back of the north wind, that the narrator is deliberately placed into conflict with the hero whose story he is relating.

The narrator, therefore, also shares some characteristics with Pater's in "The Child in the House", and with Lee's in "The Child in the Vatican". Although the narrator in *At the Back of the North Wind* is at no point confused with Diamond himself – in fact, his identity is quite clearly laid out towards the novel's end – he plays a key role in the distancing of the reader from the fantasy world to which Diamond alone, in this story, can claim access. The same dissociation is an essential element of Pater's childhood spaces, kept always at a distance through the veil of memory, and of Lee's child/aesthetic spheres which not only remain vague, but from which we, along with Sister Atalanta, are barred. In *North Wind* we are privy to a much more detailed description of the space which Diamond has entered, but we stop just short of travelling alongside him. This intimacy – which is already limited to some degree by the jarring admission on the narrator's part that "I have now come to the most difficult part of my story... because I do not know enough about it" (93) – is further stifled by the confusion that is introduced as a result of the narrator's contradictions.

In his insistent and uncharacteristic rejection of the notion that the country at North Wind's back is an inherently silent one, then, the narrator again juxtaposes the child's perspective with that of the adult. Yet again, Diamond's emerges the stronger. Later in the description of Diamond's time in the land at the back of the north wind, the narrator dutifully relates that, should two of the country's inhabitants meet at the base of a tree which showed them glimpses of the world they left behind, "then they would smile to each other more sweetly than at any other time, as much as to say: 'Ah, you've been up there too!'" (99). Despite the narrator's persistent belief that no country could be entirely non-verbal, the description of the land at North Wind's back suggests that it is a space in which experiences and thoughts are communicated, if necessary, without need of language. This non-verbal quality is also indicated by Diamond's description of the songs that he heard while at the back of the north wind. According to all three accounts, the land is divided by a river which "flowed not only through, but over grass" (96). The river is repeatedly referred to in the novel not as a river, but as the source for the songs that it sings, according to Diamond, in people's heads rather than in their ears. The curious quality of the songs sung at the back of the north wind is emphasised by the narrator and the characters. In the land itself, the songs are entirely non-verbal; never sung aloud, they simply envelop the minds of the inhabitants, yet the implication is always that they are sung, never played. These are not instrumental songs, as Diamond makes clear, for they are "the tunes the river at the back of the north wind *sung*" (96), yet they are not necessarily verbal, either. It is not surprising, therefore, that language offers such an inadequate means of accurately depicting such a place. This extra-linguistic, even non-verbal, quality of the country is intimately tied with its definition as aesthetic realm, an association best relayed in *At the Back of the North Wind* through song.

Almost immediately following his return from the back of the north wind,

Diamond and his mother discover a book of verses on a beach shore, which Diamond's mother quickly dismisses as "nonsense"; Diamond, however, insists they're "almost the very tune [the river] used to sing... that's just how it went" (120).

The poems are characterised by their cyclical nature and steady rhythm:

...the sweetest wind
that blows by the river
flowing for ever
and over the shallows
where dip the swallows
above it blows
the life as it goes
awake or asleep
into the river
that sings as it flows... (117)

One reading through the pages of poetry might be struck by the monotony, repetition, and concise, fragmented structure of each line. Yet the poems call to mind Kristeva's description of the semiotic rhythm within language – "indifferent to language... this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical" (97).

William Gray, in "George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun", sees MacDonald's poetry as generally hovering "on the borders of the semiotic. MacDonald's actual poetry may be unremarkable; what is remarkable is the extent to which he privileges the poetic, in a gesture which... seems to hint forward to Kristeva" (881). The verses from the back of the north wind, and later on Diamond's own poetry, seem to privilege what Kristeva refers to as the genotext in language, that which can "be detected in phematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm)... or in the economy of mimesis (fantasy, the deferment of denotation, narrative, etc.)" (Kristeva 97). The verse above is certainly characterised by the repetition of phonemes: /ō/ in "goes," "flowing," "blows," and "flows," and /i/ in

“wind,” “river,” and “sings”. In both its rhythmic structure and rhyme scheme the poem’s lack of clear structure forces the technical devices to the fore so that the focus of the verse is on its musical components rather than its content. The chaotic metrical pattern varies frequently, reasserting the presence of the poem’s rhythm, but not so drastically as to upset the progression of the poem entirely. The effect calls to mind musical notation, as if the poem was structured according to a single time signature: the fragmented lines suggestive of measures on a score which correspond to the time signature without necessarily following a consistent rhythmic pattern. Drawing attention to the verse’s technical devices also works to defer meaning in the words themselves, an effect which Kristeva also associates with the genotext. Words in these verses are privileged not so much for their ability to carry meaning as for their musicality, particularly their rhythm and shape. Despite the fact that the verses are, as such, composed of words, they retain an extra-linguistic status.

When one considers MacDonald’s relationship with Ruskin and the aesthetic perspectives which are carried throughout his fantasy, these texts seem to offer a reclassification of language as an instrument of art rather than a tool of communication. Given their friendship, it is interesting to consider Ruskin’s description of the relationship between language and art in relation to MacDonald’s poetry in *North Wind*. Ruskin writes that

It is not... always easy, either in painting or literature, to determine where the influence of language stops, and where that of thought begins. Many thoughts are so dependent upon the language in which they are clothed, that they would lose half their beauty if otherwise expressed. But the highest thoughts are those which are least dependent on language, and the dignity of any composition and praise to which it is entitled, are in exact proportion to its independency of language or expression. (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 8-9)

It seems that MacDonald similarly saw language as an important and yet intrinsically flawed means of artistic creation. He explicitly questions language, not only in *At the Back of the North Wind*, but many of his other texts, most notably *Phantastes*, and

certainly in *Lilith*, while the power of song threads throughout the fantastic spheres in which language is re-constructed. In *Lilith*, for example, Vane frequently calls the reader's attention to the inadequacy of language to express meaning, interrupting his narrative to emphasise his struggle as writer: "I am indeed often driven to set down what I know to be but a clumsy and doubtful representation of the mere feeling aimed at, none of the communicating media of this world being fit to convey it, in its peculiar strangeness, with even an approach to clearness or certainty" (45). Just as the narrator in *At the Back of the North Wind* and the canonic literary ancestors to whom he turned struggled to depict the eponymous fantastic realm, so Vane's attempts to capture the fantasy world with language are met with a "continuing and abiding sense of failure" (Collins 45), as both Collins and Roderick McGillis²⁴ note.

Unfortunately, both Collins' and McGillis' discussions of language in *Lilith* have gone no further than to highlight what Vane himself makes clear: that "as often as I try to fit the reality with nearer words, I find myself in danger of losing the things themselves" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 12). Osama Jarrar explores the relationship between fantasy literature and language somewhat further, pointing out that fantasy literature, by its very nature, "allows for figuration of language and thus posits a multiplicity of meanings," and attributing this characteristic to the fact that

fantasy privileges the paradigmatic axis of language that designates the superiority of metaphor over metonymy, while realism privileges the syntagmatic axis of language that designates the presence of metonymy. This implies that fantasy embodies a figurative playfulness of language and thus invites figurative interpretations. The language of fantasy is not a closed totality that consists in the combination of a signifier and a signified. (33-4)

However, his discussion pulls away from MacDonald's construction of language as a concept and focuses instead on its role in the theme of social change in *At the Back of the North Wind*. What Jarrar, Collins, and McGillis do not consider is the way in

²⁴ See McGillis "Liminality as Psychic Stage in MacDonald's *Lilith*" 126-7.

which words, in the fantasy worlds of *Lilith* as much as of *At the Back of the North Wind*, are broken down to their purely aesthetic essence, becoming little more than notes in a musical score. Beyond simply identifying the restrictions of language MacDonald re-constructs words themselves as extra-linguistic, aesthetic signs and weaves them into his creation of fantastic literary spheres. As in Diamond's depictions of the non-verbal atmosphere at the back of the north wind, children are more sensitive to this non-verbal use and understanding of language in *Lilith*. In this respect MacDonald's child figures resemble Lee's, although his children pose a much more explicit challenge to adult constructions of language. Lona's conversations with Vane undermine his linguistic authority – in one instance in particular his attempts to communicate are reduced to entirely meaningless mouth-sounds: “I do not know about *world*. What is it? What more but a word in your beautiful big mouth? – That makes it something!” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 63).

Of course, the fantastic space that MacDonald creates in *Lilith* is not itself characterised by silence and non-verbal communication. The importance of the extra-linguistic aesthetic and its relationship to the child is instead made clear primarily by the waters which flow hidden beneath this world, so that every element of the land that Vane explores is quite literally steeped in it. The river in *At the Back of the North Wind* was intricately linked to music of a purely aesthetic nature; likewise when the underground waters in *Lilith* are first mentioned, they seem to exist almost entirely as music rather than as any kind of physical matter. The water itself is not seen – it is the “sweet watery noise... the veiled melody of molten music” (*Lilith* 53) which permeates the soil and twice heals Vane. The importance of water in George MacDonald's work, Hein points out, is typically associated with “the biblical image of the Living Water: the life of God that scripture indicates He bestows upon those who believe” (92). To deny the importance of biblical influence on the role and

nature of water in MacDonald's fantasy would be folly – the waters in *Lilith* are revealed, in its conclusion, to stem from “the river of the water of life” born at the feet of “the Ancient of Days” (236). However, to ignore the aesthetic significance attached to it in *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* – not to mention *Phantastes* – is equally naïve. The water upon which MacDonald's fantasy land is built is molten music, a current that is influenced as much by the author's aestheticism as it is by his divinity. Once again, the two are inextricably linked for MacDonald, and water plays an integral part in this union; in his “unspoken sermon”, “The Truth”, he describes water “the very thought of [which] makes one gasp with an elemental joy no metaphysician can analyse” (68). This water is one “that dances, and sings, and slakes the wonderful thirst – symbol and picture of that draught for which the woman of Samaria made her prayer... Let a man go to the hillside and let the brook sing to him till he loves it, and he will find himself far nearer the fountain of truth” (68). Water's aesthetic nature is so essential to MacDonald's divinity that he writes of a brook that he would, if he might, have “running through my room, yea, babbling along my table, this water” (68). And in his description of a hillside brook as equivalent to the fountain of truth, water is associated once again with music, with singing – the tie is not unique to *At the Back of the North Wind* or *Lilith*. Most importantly, water, for MacDonald, is associated with an elemental beauty that carries with it the truth of God.

MacDonald's description of water, perhaps more than any other aspect of his fantasies, seems to evoke Oscar Wilde's notion that “aestheticism is a search after the signs of the beautiful. It is the science of the beautiful through which men seek the correlation of the arts. It is, to speak more exactly, the search after the secret of life” (quoted in Ellman 159). In nearly every mention of water, in *North Wind* and certainly in *Lilith*, it is equated with song: “river[s] of water made vocal by its rocks”

(*Lilith* 232), and thickets which “gave birth to a rivulet, and every rivulet to its water song” (233). It is this dual significance of water in both *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* which solidifies MacDonald’s fusion of spirituality with the aesthetic, and binds both of these threads together within the child figure. For water in *Lilith* seems almost to centre around the Lovers – themselves the very essence of the child-like which MacDonald so admired.

Despite the fact that it was Lilith who gathered up the “live torrents” that crossed the Land of Waters, and it is Lilith who ultimately enables the refilling of the land’s empty channels and dry lakes, Vane initially finds himself able to hear the water only while in or near the Lovers’ valley, and the river – the only open source of water in the land – exists to protect the Lovers from Lilith’s murderous intentions. Mara and Adam both identify the Lovers’ growth as ultimately tied to their access to water: Mara enigmatically suggesting that “when they are thirsty enough, they will have water, and when they have water, they will grow. To grow, they must have water, and beneath, it is flowing still” (73), and Adam chastising Vane for failing to provide wells for the children in order that they might grow. The appearance of the Lovers is, furthermore, frequently announced by a “burst of bell-like laughter” (153) or “laughter clear and sweet as the music of a brook” (54), and their communication with Vane consists of “stories – mostly very childish, and often seeming to mean hardly anything. On one such occasion a moody little fellow sang me a strange crooning song, with a refrain so pathetic that, although unintelligible to me, it caused tears to run down my face” (61).

It is interesting to note that when the water finally returns to the land it becomes itself essentially child-like – the Lovers imagine it flowing in rivers, “merry and loud, like thousands and thousands of happy children” (197-8) – because the comparison, which is here most explicit, occurs in *At the Back of the North Wind* as

well. In his dream, Diamond is guided by “the gurgling and plashing of a little stream” which had a voice “like the laughter he had heard from the sky” (MacDonald, *North Wind* 199) – laughter which is revealed to be that of small children. Thus the voice of the river in Diamond’s dream is, like that of the river in *Lilith*, the voice of laughing children, its “merry tune” (199) composed once again of their child-like non-verbal expression. In fact, Diamond’s own engagement with verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, and with a reconsideration of language, forms a key element of one of the novel’s major plot segments. The story of Diamond’s time in London in *At the Back of the North Wind* is marked primarily by his experience as a cab driver and his attempts to learn how to read – his entry into the world of rational, communicative language from which he has in many ways been kept apart. Yet what he learns to read are poems, either the verses attributed to the river at North Wind’s back, or those written by Mr Raymond. The choice of texts by which Diamond is, presumably, delivered into adult discourse is still marked by poetic language, by language which privileges musicality and aesthetics over communication. His transition, furthermore, is never completed; dying before he can be fully inducted into the dreary, colourless world of what Gray calls “normal human language” (*Measure of Truth* 52), what might also be termed symbolic language, Diamond returns to the non-verbal aesthetic paradise at the back of the north wind.

Diamond’s interactions with the adults around him are characterised by his inability to properly engage with them using their own language. He confuses and unnerves his parents, fellow cab-drivers, and casual acquaintances with his uncannily wise, yet unfailingly optimistic, perspectives on the world around him. In one conversation with his mother, Diamond’s ability to question even the most innocuous adult discussion reveals his precarious position within discourse:

‘I don’t know,’ said Diamond thoughtfully, ‘whether Mrs Coleman had bells on her toes.’

‘What do you mean, child?’ said his mother.
‘She had rings on her fingers anyhow,’ returned Diamond.
‘Of course she had, as any lady would. What had that to do with it?’
‘When we were down at Sandwich,’ said Diamond, ‘you said you would have to part with your mother’s ring, now we were poor.’
[...] ‘Really, Diamond, a body would need to mind what they say to you.’
‘Why?’ said Diamond. ‘I only think about it.’
‘That’s just why,’ said his mother.
‘Why is that why?’ persisted Diamond... After various attempts to understand [his mother], resumed and resumed again in spite of invading sleep, he was conquered at last, and gave in, murmuring over and over to himself, ‘Why is why?’ but getting no answer to his question. (MacDonald, *North Wind* 146)

The tension in this interaction demonstrates the way in which Diamond’s attempts to communicate with the adults in his life nearly always fail in some way; newly entering into their world of language from his child’s understanding which does not privilege communication to the same extent, Diamond’s ability to see beyond what is communicated causes a sense of anxiety which is compounded by his persistent undermining of linguistic convention. Simply by thinking *about* the language used around him, Diamond eventually reaches the unanswerable question “Why is why?”, forcing a complete, temporary break down in communication with his mother.

As happens frequently throughout the story, Diamond fails to engage in adult discourse appropriately, yet it is this failure which marks him as “God’s baby” - he is closer to the divine, occupying a position approached, but not attained by those few adults who occasionally see the truth and beauty in Diamond’s use of language. As the narrator best exemplifies, even such sensitive adults have difficulty truly accepting the child figure’s place beyond the linguistic, or understanding the centrality of this position to the child’s vision of the Divine beautiful, their ties to language keeping them shackled to reality. The same is true of *Lilith*: no matter how deeply Vane may seem to penetrate into the fantasy world around him he is not only excluded from the aesthetic paradise to which the children are admitted, but is incapable of truly understanding the land in the mirror because he is bound within a

language that precludes it. And, unlike Lee, MacDonald takes this idea further, carrying it through to what is perhaps its logical conclusion: that the truest understanding can only be achieved in states that remain entirely untouched by the corruption of language.

Regardless of their close association with MacDonald's divine, aesthetic worlds and their unique way of seeing the world, children – the Lovers and Diamond not excepted – are still indoctrinated into language from a very young age. According to MacDonald, they may retain the ability to see and to accept a truth inherent in the beauty around them – the union of the divine with the aesthetic – but they still use language to communicate to some degree. They have been tainted by the language of the adult world which threatens their childish existence – even the perpetual childhood of the Lovers. When a new baby is “born” to the Lovers, that is, discovered in the forest near their fields, Vane is struck by the sense of the babies' superior knowledge, and exclaims to Lona, “It is a pity the little sillies can't speak till they've forgotten everything they had to tell!” (*Lilith* 63). Lona recalls, “Little Toma, the last before this baby, looked as if she had something to tell, when I found her under a beech-tree, sucking her thumb, but she hadn't. She only looked up at me – oh, so sweetly!” (63-4). Where Lee's privileging of the extra-linguistic child stops, MacDonald pushes forward, suggesting that the infant, who has not yet entered into a world of linguistic communication on any level, possesses a knowledge of truth which is lost with the acquisition of language. *At the Back of the North Wind* makes the relationship between the infant's place outside of language and MacDonald's aesthetic paradise even more explicit, with baby siblings becoming Diamond's muse, anchoring him to the land at North Wind's back and the vision of beauty there.

As Diamond ages, growing and entering ever further into the mundane world of adult language, his younger brother – later his younger sister, and at one point a

neighbour's child, the identity of the baby being so unimportant as to become non-existent beyond its role as "baby" – provide a connection to the world that he is rapidly leaving behind. "When Diamond's rhymes grew scarce, he always began dancing the baby" (*North Wind* 138), forming the physical and emotional connection with the baby which facilitates his songs. The fact that Diamond's own verses, and those to which he is particularly drawn, are "nonsense" rhymes is significant; when Diamond is "too happy to make a song of his own" (191), he is likewise "so happy that [he] can only sing nonsense" (194) to baby, nonsense being, of course, "a very good thing... a little of it now and then, and more of it for baby" (195). The nature of this nonsense which is so essential to human nature, and especially to the well-being of babies and children, is grounded in its resemblance to the music of the river at the back of the north wind, Diamond's self-professed fount of inspiration:

baby baby babbling
 your father's gone a-cabbing
 to catch a shilling for its pence
 to make the baby babbling dance
 for old Diamond's a duck
 they say he can swim
 but the duck of diamonds
 is baby that's him
 and all of the swallows
 the merriest fellows
 that bake their cake
 with the water they shake
 out of the river
 flowing for ever
 and make dust into clay
 on the shiniest day...
 baby's the funniest
 baby's the bonniest
 and he never wails
 and he's always sweet
 and Diamond's his nurse
 and Diamond's his nurse
 and Diamond's his nurse. (137-8)

Diamond's songs are perhaps more exemplary of nonsense verse than those contained in the book from the back of the north wind: while the nursery songs

attempt to create an image of the river from which they stem, Diamond's stray from any such particular aim. The confused, almost fragmented quality of Diamond's poetry may be linked to its source: baby itself. Diamond makes clear that the role of the bouncing infant on his knee is something more than just to provide inspiration, claiming that he "couldn't make a line without baby on my knee. We make them together, you know. They're just as much baby's as mine. It's he that pulls them out of me" (177). Baby is not Diamond's muse, or facilitator, nor is he simply audience; he is seemingly co-author, but yet again, something more. The baby acts as a conduit for Diamond's most childlike essence. Baby's completely extra-linguistic state of being is a necessary part of Diamond's attempts to recreate "the tunes the river at the back of the north wind sung" (96) because it allows Diamond to once more access – through baby – the world on the other side of the mirror, the aesthetic paradise from which he is becoming ever further removed.

Although *At the Back of the North Wind* essentially charts Diamond's slow loss of a privileged, extra-linguistic, aesthetic perception of the world, he is nevertheless permitted a return to his interaction with North Wind and his more childlike self as the novel closes. Just as his initial stay in the country at North Wind's back takes place while Diamond is ill and comatose, his later encounters with that mysterious lady coincide with supposed returns of his illness. He has not, we learn, truly been to the land at the back of the north wind - he has seen but a shadow of it. In order to reach the realm itself Diamond must 'die'; in true MacDonald form he must relinquish his hold on symbolic, linguistic reality in order to pass through the north wind and travel to the paradise at her back. The transitional states in which Diamond is permitted access not only to the land at the back of the north wind, but to the woman herself, suggest a further link between the child figure and MacDonald's divine aesthetic paradises. By associating these fantastic worlds with death and

death-like states of being, MacDonald positions the child figure as mediator between dreary reality and the longed-for release of life after death. This is not only accomplished through the child figure's kinship with the extra-linguistic aesthetic spaces, but through their construction along a continuum of perception that incorporates both death and the unknowable child mind.

ii. Back Again: Distancing and Spiritual Doubt

In "A Reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*", Manlove comes close to touching upon the novel's construction of fantastic worlds that are grounded in perceptions of the child's psyche. He notes that

MacDonald writes *At the Back of the North Wind* in such a way as to throw us out of our conscious, organising, formalising selves. He wants to break down our way of reducing life and art to schemes and patterns, and to respond at a much more intimate level... That is why he writes the book for children, who put no structures between themselves and direct experience... that is the object of *At the Back of the North Wind*: it seeks to take us back to the way of seeing of an innocent child. That vision perceives the world directly, without connecting things together with the mind and so distancing them. (56-7)

Manlove's reading is an intriguing one, but it highlights the way in which a reliance on MacDonald's assertion that "the *childlike* is the divine" ("Child in the Midst" 14) can limit the exploration of the child figure's particular position in fantasies like *North Wind* and *Lilith*. He refers to the child figure's spiritual position in that text in ways that touch on a few of the more important characteristics of the child in MacDonald's fantasies – its relationship to music and dreams, for example ("A Reading" 76) – yet he does not go into any depth about the specifics of the child's unique relationship with such manifestations of God. Nor does he address the importance of the fantastic worlds in the text aside from noting that they do, in many ways, bleed through into "the 'reality' of Diamond's family life in London" (62). He suggests that Diamond "will always be just on the edge of what he saw and heard at

the back of the North Wind [sic], but unable quite to recall or articulate it” (61), without exploring the implications of this difficulty in articulation. But his approach only hints at the child’s complexity, and overlooks the most crucial element of MacDonald’s child figures: their role in an attempt to mediate his theological anxieties regarding the indomitable division between life and death. One crucial way in which MacDonald accomplishes this mediation is by constructing his fantasy worlds within a continuum of liminal states of being, one which encompasses dreams, the child psyche, and, as I shall demonstrate further on, death.

MacDonald does not suggest childhood is an abstract state which the adult reader can assume – almost as if by reading the novel one slips on a pair of glasses which allow one to look again through the eyes of childhood – in order to respond to the world around her “directly, without connecting things together with the mind and so distancing them” (57). Instead, he constructs his fantasy worlds themselves according to popular perceptions of the child’s mind, and in doing so he deliberately prevents an adult reader from the kind of access which Manlove identifies. As I mentioned previously, MacDonald meticulously distances adult readers from child-like perception in *At the Back of the North Wind* through the narrator’s mediation; likewise, although we as readers are permitted, to borrow Farah Mendlesohn’s phrasing, to “rid[e] on the shoulder of the otherworldly visitor” (xiv) in *Lilith*, we are, as Vane is, kept from fully immersing ourselves in the world of childhood. Yet one reason why readers are held at such distance can be found by examining MacDonald’s construction of the fantasy worlds in both texts as mirrors of the child mind – or perhaps more accurately, of anxieties regarding the mind of the child.

Shuttleworth explores the way in which the study of the child’s mind evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, with ideas and theories from one discipline

influencing those of others, as literature, psychiatry, psychology,²⁵ and medicine all worked to better understand childhood as a state of being and what it truly meant to look at the world through the eyes of a child. Much of the inquiry that Shuttleworth considers was directed towards the relationship between the child-state and pathologies of the adult mind; questions about whether children were to be classed as insane using adult definitions of sanity led to the possibility that the very state of childhood itself might be pathological, that “the very signs of their childish innocence, their ‘engaging nonsense’, could actually be the markers for mental disease” (Shuttleworth 21). In exploring the distinction between the child’s mind and the adult’s, these studies and discussions raised the issue of the control which the adult mind could exert over the child, not only in the development of the child’s rational selves, but in adults’ ability to construct and shape what it is to be a child. The anxiety raised by the prospect of the child’s potential freedom from adult boundaries and definitions manifested itself in several of the studies – and a great deal of the literature – that Shuttleworth discusses. Investigations of child lying, masturbation, and moral insanity are concerned, according to Shuttleworth, with the ability of the child “to enter a ‘secret’ world, not answerable to adult control. The preoccupation with that hidden ‘viper’ of lying or sexuality was central to the middle class will to control, which repeatedly found itself baffled by the forbidden, indecipherable inner world of the child” (65-6). As a result, many characterisations of the child-mind came to be, and to some extent still are, formed with regard to a continuum of unknowable states of being.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of Shuttleworth’s discussion is her exploration of child terror in the mid-nineteenth century. She turns to Robert

²⁵ Shuttleworth makes a distinction between psychology and psychiatry in the latter half of the nineteenth century (58, 67). See Also Hergenhahn, *An Introduction to the History of Psychology*. Hergenhahn charts the history of experimental psychology from Greek Philosophers to contemporary psychology, identifying an crucial period of development and a solidification of the discipline in the nineteenth century (262-293).

Macnish's *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1830) as one of the earliest non-literary texts to explore the idea of child terror in a time when literature offered a cache of detailed depictions. She describes how Macnish "establishes an important continuum between childhood and the dream state" (48) which is based on the idea that during childhood, as in dreams, judgement is weakened. But there is another connection which neither Macnish nor Shuttleworth, seem to have considered, namely that both states are defined by their essential unknowability. The comparison of childhood to the state of dreaming did not end with Macnish in 1830; Shuttleworth points out that "the dream state as defined by Macnish and others, where intellectual control is in abeyance, has become a defining characteristic of the child mind" (50). Of course, there is no denying that Macnish and others who studied the child mind, most notably Charles West – author of the 1848 *Lectures on the Diseases of Infancy and Childhood* – were convinced that the defining characteristic of the child mind was the abeyance of intellectual control; however, there is another underlying quality which childhood, dreams, and even death all share – specifically, that they are all states of being which it is impossible to access from within the confines of the waking, rational adult mind.

By aligning childhood with dreams, and further with madness, such theories define the child mind as a state which exists in a conceptual blind spot that is difficult, if not impossible, to re-create or articulate within rational discourse. Certainly Honeyman is quick to emphasise that this unknowable quality is frequently incorporated within constructions of childhood; she also asserts that "writers often utilize childhood as a lucid space through which to criticize the adult world" (5-6). The association of the inconceivable mind of the child with the construction of literary childhood spaces is one that Honeyman never directly discusses but which seems a logical progression, certainly in relation to MacDonald's child spaces.

MacDonald does not just imagine childhood itself as a “lucid space”; instead he constructs complex worlds which incorporate the unknowability of the child’s mind as well as its extra-linguistic aestheticism. In the description of the fantastic worlds in *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind*, the clearest defining feature of both spaces is the impossibility of their conceptual reconstruction. Both Vane and the Narrator in *North Wind* find themselves confronted with inevitable failure in their depiction of the fantasy worlds, and both visibly respond to the anxiety inherent in their position, no doubt much the same anxiety faced by those studying the child mind.

MacDonald’s texts do not attempt to take readers “back to the way of seeing of an innocent child” as Manlove suggests; instead, he constructs his elusive fantasy worlds using the characteristics definitive of the state of childhood itself in order to emphasise the distance between that Edenic, unknowable existence and the world beheld through the eyes of the rational, linguistic adult. I am not suggesting that MacDonald was aware of either Macnish’s work or similar studies; despite their popularity, there is no direct evidence linking the two. However, Shuttleworth does make it clear that a conception of the child mind which shared the unknowability of dream-states had been established by the time MacDonald was writing. Most importantly, she shows that both literary and scientific accounts of the child mind shed light on anxieties which surrounded – and which, as Honeyman suggests, continue to surround – concerns about the state of mind which the child inhabits, particularly the fear that it may prove a world utterly and permanently undefinable. MacDonald’s fantasy worlds are constructed in line with such anxieties regarding the child mind, offering a similar vision of childhood as an inscrutable state existing on a continuum with dreams. For MacDonald, at least, this is a continuum which, I shall demonstrate, also extends to encompass death.

There certainly is no question that MacDonald's fantasy worlds are often dreamlike; those in *At the Back of the North Wind* are accessed when Diamond is in a coma, or when he is sleeping, or shortly before his death, while Manlove suggests that nearly the entirety of *Lilith* should be read as a dream sequence, noting that Vane "begins his journey from the library of his house in the evening, after a day spent reading. In short, he is to be seen as being asleep and dreaming; that is, he has entered his imagination" ("Logic of Fantasy" 47-8). Yet the text itself does not seem to support such a reading; there is no moment prior to Vane's first encounter with Mr Raven that suggests he may have fallen asleep, yet throughout there are repeated allusions to dreaming, particularly from Vane himself. Upon arriving in the world on the other side of the mirror, Vane reflects on the realisation that "I was not yet alive; I was only dreaming I lived! I was but a consciousness with an outlook! Truly I had been nothing else in the world I had left, but now I knew the fact" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 79). He later admits to fearing that he should "but wake to know that I had dreamed, and that all my going was nowhither! I would rather go on and on than come to such a close" (79); of course, when Vane does in fact "wake" there is no such revelation. But the confusion of dreaming and waking plagues *Lilith's* final chapters in excess, in fact to such an extent that Tom Shippey suggests "in either world... the other appears to be a dream. Neither has priority, or assured superior status. But of course the reader has to be persuaded of this equality, which is contradicted by all everyday experience" (19).

The sense that the events of the novel are a dream is inspired primarily by the fantastic world in which they take place – a world which bleeds through into perceived reality until the stability of that perception is lost. But this world is only like a dream-world, for despite Manlove's assertion there is little to suggest that Vane is, in reality, asleep. Instead Vane finds himself in a state like sleep, like death –

similarly impossible to relate, providing a similarly unique perspective on his own “reality” – which is yet neither of those. The depiction of this fantasy world, like those in *At the Back of the North Wind*, as associated with the child figure’s divine aestheticism and extra-linguistic potential highlights its distinction from sleep itself; it is, instead, constructed as a parallel to the child’s mind, its state of being. I have already made some mention of the way in which both *North Wind* and *Lilith* hold adult-figures as well as readers at a distance from their central fantasy worlds; however, by constructing fantasy worlds in both texts as literary experiences of the child-mind and marking them with the characteristics consistently attributed to his child figures in both texts – namely, a unique relationship with the aesthetic as well as the divine which is predicated on the child’s place outside of rational adult discourse – MacDonald takes this distancing to another level.

The child’s mind becomes a paradise, but it is one which the adult characters in both novels can but glimpse; even Vane, who travels extensively through the Lovers’ and Lilith’s fantastic world, never fully interacts with it. He is kept at a distance, and his narrative is distanced likewise, as a result of – through his own admission – his frustrating reliance on the inadequacies of language. As I have shown, the adult figures glimpsing the child’s paradise in *At the Back of the North Wind*, Durante and the Narrator, struggle in their attempts to translate the space into language. The juxtaposition between the fantasy world, the child figures, and the adult-figures serves not to return the reader to a childlike state themselves but to emphasise the impossibility of such a return, the seemingly impassable distance between child and adult. This distance is indicative of an anxiety which characterises much of MacDonald’s work, and pertains to the importance of the child to MacDonald’s theological views.

I have already explored the way in which MacDonald’s fundamental spiritual

beliefs are part of a complex relationship with his often-overlooked aestheticism, and the child's significance to this engagement. However, the child figure's connection to the extra-linguistic, divine aestheticism which infuses his fantasy worlds takes on new significance in the context of MacDonald's own religious anxieties. These anxieties also shed light on the tendency to keep the narrator – and the reader – distanced from the aesthetic paradises in both *Lilith* and *North Wind*. For despite Greville MacDonald's assertion that his father "had no intimacy with Fear", that "his faith... took the sting out of all physical terrors. We... see at the close of these Manchester days with what equanimity he looked death in the face" (200), his literary work suggests otherwise. It suggests that MacDonald experienced a life-long struggle not simply in spite of his faith, but because of it: the clash between his desire for the blissful life after death and the responsibilities and hardships of his lived reality. In the context of this struggle, to interpret the child figure as the divine, and nothing more, is to dismiss its true importance in MacDonald's fantasies.

If the child figure's divinity is not the sole reason for its key position *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith*, then why this centrality? MacDonald could have created Wordsworthian child characters who embody divine nature and serve simply to inspire adult readers to view the world around them differently, to step beyond the functional rationalising vision which defines their world, and indeed Manlove suggests that he does. But *Lilith's* final chapter, Vane's oft debated rejection from Mount Paradiso and abrupt return to the doldrums of "real life", denies such a reductive interpretation. Vane's relationship with the Lovers appears to have almost exactly that influence upon him which Manlove would bestow upon readers of *At the Back of the North Wind*: it is during his time spent with the Lovers that he comes closest to understanding, and certainly takes great strides towards appreciating, the fantastic world in which he finds himself. His conversations with Lona and the

children seem to have a significant effect, rendering his world-view more malleable; it is only after living with them that he embraces the ideas which he had rejected coming from Adam. Vane becomes, at least to his mind, “like a child, constantly wondering, and surprised at nothing” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 90). But the Lovers not only allow Vane to return to an almost child-like way of looking at the world; they also enable him to recognise the limitations of adult understanding, to admit, “probably, had I been more of a child myself, I should have wondered less” (160).

The text, of course, does not end with Vane following the children to the true Heaven of Mount Paradiso: he, like the reader, is thrust harshly back into a sudden reality, in a move which has sparked seemingly endless debate as to its significance. One thing which this ending does make clear is the fact that the role of the child figure, and the importance of the childlike to spiritual salvation, is not limited to its ability to enable a return to the child’s way of seeing the world. Vane’s final disappointment is also perhaps the most jarring and blatant instance of the tendency of MacDonald’s fantasies to force the adult-figures – and the reader with them – away from the child-paradises which lie at their core. The instability of the child’s unique vision in the face of its indoctrination into communicative, symbolic language and the struggle faced by adult narrators in articulating the stories they are trying to recount suggest that such a return is not possible, at least, not in the way in which Manlove describes. MacDonald thus seems to refute Reinhard Kuhn’s theory that “as long as the adult can recover, through the intellect, the imagination, or the involuntary memory, the mental set of the child... then he can relive the profound reality of his erstwhile condition and can even retranslate it into terms comprehensible to other adults” (12). For MacDonald none but the child – and it must be pointed out that his child figure is, of course, not just any child but an *ideal* child figure – can attain anything more than a glimpse of his paradises until the

moment of their own death.

It is therefore not surprising that Diamond – whose progression ever further away from an extra-linguistic aesthetic paradise is charted in *At the Back of the North Wind* – must relinquish symbolic language entirely in order to return to that state, an extrication which, as I have mentioned, he can only achieve through death. Death in MacDonald's fantasy novels thus exists on a plane similar to the Paterian concept of Death as a return, a re-beginning: as in Pater, Death in both *Lilith* and *North Wind* is not constructed as an inevitable finality. It is a liminal state through which the individual passes as she dies into life. In *Lilith*, especially, as Collins points out, "graves are also doors" (11), and the vivid life-dreams that Vane experiences while he sleeps in Adam's mausoleum constructs death as a transitional experience, a temporary suspension between two states of "living". There is virtually no distinction made in *Lilith* between the twinned states of sleep and death: both are experienced as dream worlds, and the one term is easily exchanged for the other. The two are separated only by agency: Mr Vane finds himself in the world on the other side of the garret mirror accidentally, or else at the design of Mr. Raven, while he chooses to sleep in Adam's crypt, the choice that leads him so close to the heaven of Mount Paradiso. In *North Wind* a similarly slight difference is established between the two states, with the land to which Diamond travelled in his comatose dream-state revealed as but a reflection of the world which he is to reach through death itself. In both *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* the fantastic, dream-like realms which are explicitly depicted are merely shades of paradise to which the child is given access only through death. For MacDonald, death is placed on the same continuum as sleep, and the mind of the child; it, too, constitutes such an undefinable, liminal state of being. The child figure in MacDonald's fantasies is thus configured as the site of convergence for aestheticism, divinity, and immortal death itself.

Although MacDonald's description of the child as the divine has, as I have emphasised throughout this analysis, limited interpretations of the child figure in his fantasies, in looking beyond theology we should not necessarily leave it out of consideration entirely. MacDonald describes an essential, an innate goodness which is an inextricable part of the child: "No amount of evil can *be* the child. No amount of evil, not to say in the face, but in the habits, or even in the heart of the child, can make it cease to be a child, can annihilate the divine idea of childhood [sic] which moved in the heart of God when he made that child after his own image" ("Midst" 15). This notion of "childhood" as an inherent quality of the child links it not only to God, but to God's creation and love of humanity.

MacDonald's child figure is the manifestation of the divine to which it has so often been reduced, though its place in relation to this divinity is not quite as simple as it is typically presented. In its union with the spiritual, the child figure offers a union between divinity and humanity, and the position that it occupies between the two worlds – not just its investment with the divine – is essential to MacDonald's fantasy literature. Through its complex place in MacDonald's spirituality, the child becomes part of the means by which MacDonald attempts to work through the theological tensions which present themselves in his work. As I mentioned earlier, MacDonald's faith has often been interpreted as evidence that he welcomed this transition from living death to life after death; his son's recollections offer the image of a man who faces death fearlessly, the result of "his personal embodiment of the sixth beatitude" (Greville MacDonald 200). Yet Manlove identifies a trend stretching "across MacDonald's writing as a whole, between his fantasy fiction on the one hand and his many novels of 'real life' on the other" ("Logic" 56), namely the "continual oscillation between a longed-for heaven and the all-too earthly present, between hope and doubt, rapture and happiness" (55). MacDonald may have faced death

without fear, but his work suggests that his ecstatic expectation of the paradise that provided the model for his fantastic worlds was tempered with a “world of doubt” (56).

The distance between the adult narrator/reader and the child-like aesthetic fantasy world is also the distance between humanity and the divine whose existence seems to have tortured MacDonald: both the fantastic world and its heavenly counterpart are kept tantalisingly out of reach. Manlove goes on to state that for MacDonald, “between these two there could be no resolution, only the continued desire that one would give away to the other, and the mingling acceptance and resignation in their not yet doing so, [the] yearned for joy and lived doubt” (56). This torturous anticipation characterises the duality of MacDonald’s fiction as a whole but manifests most visibly in his fantasies: dream-like worlds, defying description and infused with child-like aestheticism, offer the promise of paradise which is not fulfilled. By constructing his fantastic realms, themselves shades of the Heaven he anticipated, as child-like spaces, mirroring the aesthetic, non-verbal, undefinable state of childhood itself, MacDonald mediates these tensions: the child figure offers the possibility of a reconciliation of the two otherwise divergent spheres, humanity and the divine. Although in both novels he rejects such a resolution, leaving the adult-figure stranded in the everyday world, even in its failure to unite the lived world with the spiritual one the child still represents a bond between the two, if one that can only ever be defined by its unrealisable potential. The conclusions of both *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* are indicative of that lingering potentiality, as the loss of the child figure is construed in such a way as to leave a path where the adult may eventually follow. Vane thus concludes that “when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 238).

MacDonald's construction of a divine, aesthetic child-ideal from which he builds his fantastic worlds takes the relationship between the child figure and non-death in a different direction than either Lee or Pater. His inability to resolve the theological anxieties which characterise his body of work makes the relationship between the child figure and death more discomfiting than in Pater's or Lee's texts. More significantly, however, the centrality of the child to MacDonald's theological essays, in which he expounds upon his highly personal spiritual beliefs, suggests that the representation of the child figure in *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* is deeply ingrained in his understanding of salvation. MacDonald's construction of the child as a bridge between the divine and the human, and of the "childgood" as a necessary part of humanity's salvation, indicates that the role of the child in his conception of death is more intense than either Lee's or Pater's. However, regardless of the way in which they have envisioned it, all three authors share the depiction of a child or child figure which does not die in the literal, finite sense; it is an image which is presented as innately positive. The un-dead child represents a state to be longed for, one which offers the potential for a deeper relationship with art and beauty, for Lee, or eternal spiritual salvation, for MacDonald.

Yet when considered in isolation from the aesthetic or spiritual rewards, the idea of the un-dead child is, in essence, a deeply disturbing one. Both Lee and Pater approach this threshold of the uncanny, associating images of *revenants* and living dolls with their representation of a child-death which is not death, and both carefully tip-toe around it, taking care to remove any traces of horror. In MacDonald's fantasies, of course, the number of episodes which do not cause unease seem vastly outnumbered by the number which do, and yet his novels are remembered as wonderful fairy stories, a part of a golden-age of children's literature. Still, despite determined efforts to detach the vision of the child which is dead and yet not dead

from the monstrosity which is inherent in such an image, the elements of horror are stubbornly persistent. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, when Henry James turns to the concept of childhood which refuses to die in order to explore the possibility that the child figure itself is inherently monstrous.

“You little horror”:

Henry James’ Monstrous Child

“The active, contributive, close-circling wonder, as I have called it, in which the child’s identity is guarded and preserved, and which makes her case remarkable exactly by the weight of the tax on it, provides distinction for her, provides vitality and variety, through the operation of the tax - which would have done comparatively little for us hadn’t it been monstrous.”²⁶

The lines with which Henry James concludes his preface to *What Maisie Knew* (1897) offer a tantalising starting point for any literary analysis of the text; in fact, these very same words serve as an epigraph to Tony Tanner’s section on Henry James in *Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (1965). The seduction of these lines lies, apart from an unarticulated suggestion that some clue to the indecipherable puzzle of the novel’s title might be found buried within the twisting phrases, in the undercurrent of discomfort they elicit by deliberately evading a concrete interpretation. Regardless of how attentive one is to the syntactical construction of each sentence with which the preface concludes, the possibility that what is monstrous is the child itself is one that refuses to be dismissed. It lingers in the back of the mind, carrying with it an unshakable feeling of unease which threatens to taint an otherwise innocuous reading of the story that follows. Although,

²⁶ Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (10).

as we will see, Maisie's innocence and naivety has often been aggressively promoted, from these closing lines emerges the spectre of a child whose "close-circling wonder" is at once attractive and grotesque.

Maisie is self-aware, demonstrating early on a canny understanding of how she is perceived or ignored by the adults around her, and of her central-yet-peripheral position as a child within their games. She exists both within and outside the adult world, and *What Maisie Knew* capitalises on this liminality to construct a monstrous child figure, a figure whose mind, whose consciousness, not only remains wholly unfathomable, but whom we are content to leave lurking in the shadows. The construction of Maisie's childishness is simultaneously a construction of monstrosity in the sense that it treads upon our comfortably established definition of childhood – what we think of when we speak of "the child" – and threatens to reveal its fragility. Maisie's very role as child becomes monstrous in a sense that is indicative of the word's etymology, the term "monster" being derived from the Latin *monstrum*, "a warning or portent", which is also related to the verb *monstrare*, "to show, point out, or reveal", both words being themselves derived from *monero*, "to warn or advise". Maisie as monstrous child thus serves both as warning and as revelation about the conceptualisation of childhood itself.

Until this point, each of the chapters in this study has focused on the way that literary child figures have served as catalysts for a reconsideration of death, or for a mediation of tensions surrounding concepts of life beyond death. Yet death is absent from *What Maisie Knew*. What takes its place, instead, is the notion of the death of childhood, referred to directly only in the New York Edition preface, where James asserts that Maisie "wonders... to the death, the death of her childhood, properly speaking" (*Maisie* 8). It is an intriguing phrase, and one which, like much of James' preface, has been accepted at face value by Jamesian critics. Yet I do not believe that

we are meant to give the preface nearly as much overt authority over the text as such acceptance tends to do; the preface, I hope to make clear throughout this chapter, can be as deliberately misleading as the narrative itself. Indeed, for all that critics have spoken of the death of Maisie's childhood, hers is in fact the childhood which refuses to die, or, perhaps more accurately, which she refuses to let die. Of course, one of the reasons the child figure is so often associated with concerns about death is because childhood itself is indicative of mortality: as Carolyn Steedman notes, "the question of growth in childhood led so inexorably to the question of death" (65). The rapidity of physical development which characterises childhood more than any other time of life cannot help but evoke anxieties regarding the inevitable conclusion of such growth.

That said, Steedman points out that the natural associations between children and death are particularly defined by what she terms "the tenacious hold on Aristotelian divisions of life [have] on the depiction of childhood" (65). Although Steedman is speaking specifically of mid-nineteenth century physiological constructions of childhood, the illusion of such precise divisions between the stages of life persists elsewhere. The child must naturally disappear in the progression through to adulthood, and that disappearance is typically characterised as death. We are reminded not only of James' preface, but also of that disturbing image from Lee's essay, "Limbo", mentioned in the introduction, in which the former playground haunt of "the Children's Rabbits' House" is marked by the graves of children who have died into adulthood (4-5). The death of childhood, then, should not be discounted when discussing physical mortality. Given that Pater, Lee, and MacDonald all construct, or re-construct, the state of death as a kind of return to or continuation of an eternal childhood, James' exploration of a childhood which deliberately refuses to die is but a slightly skewed approach to the same concern, essentially literalising

their ideal of an eternal childhood. That the preface sets up an expectation of the death of Maisie's childhood does not necessarily mean that this death will take place. Instead, it creates a twisted echo of the obituary structure which characterised "Emerald Uthwart", launching the novel with the expectation of a death. Yet, whereas Emerald's death intrudes into the representation of his childhood, and *vice versa*, the death of Maisie's childhood never takes place; the novel's failure to resolve the expectation that it sets up serves to heighten her construction as monstrous child.

Given that critics so often accept that a natural death of childhood takes place in *What Maisie Knew*, to understand the way in which this finality is denied we must first consider the way in which the text's appearance of progress distorts our perception of Maisie herself. The novel is superficially presented as a *bildungsroman* which charts Maisie's growth and development, both physically and as regards her ability to correctly interpret and engage with the social games played by the adults around her – depicting her eventual transition from naïve spectator to active agent. In fact, nearly every major critical response to the text feels compelled to comment on this "central theme... [of Maisie's] transition from 'ignorance to knowledge'" (Honeyman 42). Summaries and analyses alike are peppered with phrases that describe this story of growth:

"Maisie's maturation", "she gradually becomes" (Craig 205),

"her developing awareness", "her growing awareness" (Shine 110, 119),

"Maisie's fast developing consciousness" (Lowe 190),

"Maisie has, by the end of the novel, greatly changed" (Wasiolek 167),

"[Maisie's]... growing perceptual powers" (Wolk 203),

"Maisie's development", "[Maisie's] consciousness expands to self-understanding and moral awareness" (Gargano 34, 35),

“[Maisie] outgrows her childhood” (Kaston 38),

“her developing individuality, her realization of her ‘self’”
(McCloskey 506),

“Maisie’s ascent to knowledge” (Cross 84).

The space devoted to reprinting these quotations is necessary to adequately demonstrate the obsession of critical readings of *Maisie* with the “theme of growth” (Gargano 34). However, a closer inspection of the preface and the authority which it proposes to invest in the narrator’s translation of Maisie’s thoughts – and a closer inspection of the narrator’s translation itself – suggests that the text creates in Maisie a static and troubling figure. Having achieved an epiphany of self-awareness early in the novel, she engages as active participant in the goings-on of her various guardians, making use of her role as innocent and “boundless receptacle”, as well as her “close-circling wonder”, to manipulate her parents, step-parents, and governess into playing a game of her own construction. The narrative of growth, knowledge, understanding, and realisation which defines the text is derived not from Maisie’s development, but from the gradually changing perceptions that the adults around her – including the narrator – have of the child.

The uneasiness inspired by the conclusion of the preface is further cultivated throughout the novel, a characteristic that Ruth Bernard Yeazell describes as a key element in James’ major phase:

The Jamesian critic, accustomed to interpreting difficult fictions and rendering their language into his own, may have mastered [the] art of translation too well... One translates James’s late novels at the risk of doing violence to what is most idiosyncratic and exciting in them, of making their peculiarly fluid and unsettling reality something far more stable and conventional. (1-2)

Yeazell continues, warning that “the distance at which critics must inevitably talk about novels is particularly dangerous here: *the disquiet which we feel on first reading these novels should not be so easily assuaged*” (2, my emphasis). This same

warning applies to *Maisie*; the above collection of statements vehemently asserting the importance of Maisie's development carries within it an air of protesting too much. So, too, does Muriel Shine's suggestion that "the novel, and more specifically its heroine, has occasioned such a variety of explications that one is often tempted to analyse the critics rather than the character" (121). This pointed remark is delivered in response to those critics who dare question in any way the authority of the reading explicitly outlined by James' "detailed notebook entries, his comprehensive preface... and indeed... the novel itself" (Shine 121) – those who consider whether Maisie really is left uncorrupted and pure²⁷, or whether she truly does develop a moral sense²⁸. Yet, as Leo Bersani points out, "the novels are... a complex critique of the approach to the novels proposed in the Prefaces" (653), and Phillip Horne similarly advises that "if we think that by watching [James'] working over his shoulder we will gain access to the figure being woven into the carpet, the clue to the creative mystery, we are likely to be disappointed... questions mostly go unanswered" (70-1).

Bearing this in mind, I would like to suggest that the sense of discomfort that the novel elicits, which is so often neglected in *Maisie* criticism, points to Maisie's monstrosity just as does the unease with which the preface closes. It reflects the disjunction between the child figure and the performance of childhood which Maisie assumes and clings to throughout the novel. Adding to this monstrosity is Maisie's detached and static character, not to mention the self-awareness that such qualities

²⁷ See Marius Bewley, "Maisie, Miles, and Flora, The Jamesian Innocents: A Rejoinder" (139, 142).

²⁸ Juliet Mitchell concludes that "Maisie of course tries her hand [at moral sense] and gives it up; the tears that she finally sheds lie too deep for a 'moral sense'" in "*What Maisie Knew*: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl" (187).

indicate, and, significantly, her inability or refusal to relinquish the part of the child to which she has grown accustomed. The discordance between Maisie's pantomime of childhood and the novel's presentation of her as child is revealed through suggestive gaps in the narrative, more specifically, in the narrator's description of events and Maisie's reaction to them. Once these gaps in representation are explored, it becomes clear that the "death of her childhood" to which the novel refers, and which critics have accepted at face-value,²⁹ does not in fact take place. At the very least, any death of childhood which might take place is not as simple a process of moral and intellectual development as many critics suggest.

The novel outlines the interweaving and morally questionable relations between five adults as perceived and understood by the young girl at their centre, although the events are related by an unidentified third-person narrator who claims insight into Maisie's infantile consciousness. Opening on the finalisation of Beale and Ida Farange's acrimonious divorce, the narrator describes their daughter Maisie's new role both as a weapon and unwanted baggage in the aftermath. Her new governess, Miss Overmore, uses her relationship with the child as a front of propriety for an affair with Beale which eventually culminates in their marriage, during which time it is revealed that Ida has become engaged to the charismatic Sir Claude in Maisie's absence. Miss Overmore, now Mrs Beale, and Sir Claude meet through their stepdaughter and, with Maisie again providing cover, carry out an affair which continues through the greater part of the text, much to the disdain of Maisie's second governess, the staid, morally-righteous-yet-ridiculous Mrs Wix. As Mrs Beale's and Sir Claude's respective marriages with Maisie's parents fall apart, a struggle

²⁹ Jeffers departs slightly from this general acceptance, suggesting that "if the denouement signals 'the death of her childhood, properly speaking', it is the death of something deathly. Denied all salutary light and air, Maisie's childhood has been buried in 'the tomb' from the start" (161). However, Jeffers's reading stems from a notion of corruption, that Maisie's childhood has been buried by the offensive situation imposed by her parents and step-parents. Other critics, amongst them Edward Wasiolek (170) and Ellen Pifer (35), simply accept the death of Maisie's childhood as the natural result of her progression to adolescence.

develops over who will take guardianship of the child, a question complicated by Maisie's encroaching adolescence and concerns over her own developing morality, or lack thereof. The question of what exactly Maisie knows or understands about the immorality in which her parents and step-parents are embroiled is, of course, never answered, and as previously mentioned, James' preface deliberately adds to the mystification.

In addition to offering a detailed look at the supposed origins of *Maisie* and the complexities of its composition, the preface also includes claims and suggestions that are not entirely, or at all, supported by the text itself. One reference even calls to mind the aesthetic child figure of Pater, Lee, and MacDonald:

I lose myself, truly, in appreciation of my theme on 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 has simply to wonder, as I say, about them and they begin to have meanings, aspects, solidities, connections - connections with the 'universal!' that they could scarce have hoped for. (James, *Maisie* 8)

Setting aside, for the time being, the issue of 'wonder', this description of Maisie's innate ability to transform the vulgarity of "poorer persons and things" (8) into the stuff of poetry and art is intriguing not just because it carries echoes of the unique relationship between the child figure and the aesthetic ideal which characterised the texts discussed in previous chapters, but because it suggests a function of the child figure which is not actually present in the novel. The idea that the child's freshness performs a function within the text – that of transforming the banal into the artistic – seems to contradict the text's actual representation of Maisie as a child figure.

Unlike Pater's, Lee's, and MacDonald's child figures, who are constructed very much in terms of their aesthetic or spiritual function, *What Maisie Knew* is occupied instead with exploring the child's agency and awareness, creating a child figure who exacerbates anxieties surrounding the idea of children as conscious

beings. Despite the fact that some criticism places *Maisie* within a “tradition of literary child-figuration (like that of Dickens and Twain)”³⁰ (Honeyman 42), the novel constitutes an attempt to present the child as *subject* as opposed to an object or functional catalyst. It should be noted that of all the child figures explored in this study, James’ Maisie and MacDonald’s angelic children stand alone in their relatively uncomplicated identity as real “children”. Pater’s unnamed child in “The Child in the House” is a reminiscence that is frequently confused with the adult Florian (or Narrator); Emerald Uthwart, though an eternal dead/not-dead child due to the story’s structure as obituary, is also in some ways an adult; while Lee’s child figures are either fantastic fairy-tale constructions or else child-like adults. Yet James’ description of Maisie’s ability to transform the mundane into the artistic does allude to a wider literary tradition which typically avoids considering the child figure beyond its functional properties, what it can convey or accomplish rather than what it is. This allusion highlights the importance of James’ child figure in contrast to such a tradition, particularly with regards to the emphasis he places on child consciousness.

Furthermore, while the preface’s assertion does not necessarily refer to the aesthetic child in particular, Michèle Mendelssohn does identify a tendency in James’ work to use children “as ciphers for his engagement with aesthetic and decadent themes” (97). Mendelssohn goes on to note that “in this set-up, the ‘innocent’ child functions as a blank screen for the projection of adult panics” (97), which is an intriguing encapsulation of the child’s function in that it echoes Judith Halberstam’s description of monsters who “ac[t] as a ‘fantasy screen’ upon which viewers and readers inscribe... meaning” (10). While such verbal coincidences – most likely unintentional on the part of both James and Mendelssohn – forge only indirect links

³⁰ Susan Honeyman refers to Maisie as “a satiric mirror. But she is an empty mirror... Maisie figures the ‘imposed absence’ of psychological exploration – she is a model for his method” (42), while Muriel Shine places James “in the tradition of Hawthorne, Dickens, Carroll, and Mark Twain, authors who saw in the child and the theme of childhood a ‘convenient image’ through which to express their feelings about the age in which they lived” (22).

between references to Maisie as catalyst for aesthetic transformation and Maisie as monstrous child figure it is intriguing that both construct the child as an empty screen. The function that the child serves as a blank canvas is the same as the monster's fantasy screen: both are inscribed with meaning. Mendelssohn is not alone in her description of James' child figures as blank: Ellen Pifer refers to Maisie as James' manipulation of the "blank image of Victorian childhood" (34). The interpretation of James' child figures, particularly Maisie, as blank echoes Honeyman's description of Maisie as an "empty mirror" (42). Both references call to mind a lack, and Honeyman's in particular suggests that what is absent is the reflection of the subject looking into the mirror, or more accurately, looking into Maisie. Honeyman's suggestion that Maisie constitutes a reflective void carries with it shades of Slavoj Žižek's description of the monster in "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears". As an embodiment of the subject him or herself, what the subject fears in the monster, according to Žižek, is his own "constitutive void", that which "gives body to the surplus that escapes the vicious circle of the mirror relationship" (66). The similarity between descriptions of James' child figure and concepts of monstrosity suggests that the two are linked. Thus Maisie's ability to create "the stuff of poetry and tragedy and art" out of mere vulgarities suggests her monstrosity as much as it reflects James' engagement with aestheticism and decadence: the anxiety projected onto Maisie as "fantasy screen" is the anxiety regarding the "constitutive void" that is the child herself.

i. Powerful Invisibility: Living Dolls and Automata

Despite the suggestive lines with which the preface concludes, the novel's opening chapters do their very best to construct in Maisie an utterly innocent child figure, just the kind of empty receptacle her parents take her to be. Her mind at this

stage is described as a “dim closet” (James, *Maisie* 16) into which the evil wishes of her father for her mother, and vice versa, can be tucked away until such time as they are called for, at which point they pass “in her clear shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips” (17), seemingly without Maisie herself discerning the sentiment of the messages she delivers. And even if, in these initial stages, the depiction of naivety is an accurate one, the narrator’s introduction of Maisie suggests the change which is to come:

It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before... she was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric - strange shadows dancing on a sheet. (15)

Maisie is to see more than she can initially understand, and yet simultaneously will understand more than any other child before her. Crucially, both acts, the seeing and the understanding, are due to take place “at first”. Maisie is not “taken into the confidence of passions” that she will come to understand in time: she will both see and understand them even as they come to envelop her. Although Maisie may begin as an innocent child, the development she experiences takes place not over the text as a whole, but in the opening chapters; by the fifth chapter Maisie has come to realise that “everything had something behind it: life was like a long long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock” (29), and long before this she has hit upon the power of concealment.

A change in the implications of Maisie’s “wonder” similarly indicates a change in her perspective early on in the novel. Ellen Pifer notes that “in *Maisie* the word ‘wonder’ implies not only innocent rapture but also logic, intelligence, curiosity... The child’s wonder *about* as well as *at* the world” (30-1); however, the location of these two divergent uses of the word reveals a marked shift in their

significance as the novel progresses. The word “wondered” is used twenty-five times in the text, and in all but the final usage it refers directly to Maisie – the final instance refers to Sir Claude. Furthermore, the first four uses of the word are passive, with Maisie wondering privately but not actively pursuing her curiosity. The last of these four passive uses occurs at the end of chapter five; after this, the word “wondered” is used immediately prior to, or following a question. This kind of active curiosity becomes the status quo from that point on, again suggesting that whatever change takes place with regards to Maisie’s perception of the events going on around her, it does so at an early point in the novel. In fact, Maisie undergoes a moment of crisis as early as the second chapter, one which establishes her character’s self-awareness and echoes throughout the text.

We are, in fact, presented with the consequences of this crisis before we are given a description of the event itself:

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. The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her. 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. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own. She saw more and more; she saw too much. (James, *Maisie* 18)

The idea of the “secret inner world” to which Maisie turns following this epiphany was sown in her mind by Miss Overmore, by “a mere roll of those fine eyes” (19), but the “moral revolution” described above is something much more significant. What has taken place is Maisie’s discovery of the “strange office she filled”, that “she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was

bad because she had been employed to make it so” (18). More importantly, in this moment Maisie discovers precisely how her parents – and later, by extension, her step-parents and Mrs Wix – perceive her, and the role that she plays in their interactions.

The existing criticism on *Maisie* tends to deny the child any measure of self awareness, much like her guardians.³¹ One exception is David Foster, although he can only concede that she has an aptitude for “discovering the order, responses, and consequences that structure interactions between people” (211). Like an automaton, Maisie is here granted the powers of deduction and mimicry, but she is not accorded the self-reflective powers that enable her to understand her own place within her situation; that is an experience evidently confined to the territory of adulthood. At best she is described as gradually developing such an awareness, as John Pearson suggests: “In the first stage of her narrative, Maisie’s awareness of her new circumstances in life grows fitfully... because in the beginning Maisie comprehends very little. But as Maisie becomes self-reflective, James portrays both her actions and her feelings” (78-9). Sally Shuttleworth offers one of the most significant exceptions to this reading, noting that “Maisie comes to an awareness of self at the very point that she discovers the possibilities of concealment from the adults who surround her”; however, she suggests that “Maisie is ‘doomed’, in James’s phrase, to passivity” (332). Borrowing the phrase from James himself, she sees Maisie’s efforts to conceal or perform as being entirely informed by what her parents desire from her. However, there is an element of Maisie’s awareness which denies such passivity; as Joseph Hynes crucially points out, “[Maisie] is aware of how often she herself is *not*

³¹ See Barbara Eckstein, who suggests that “Maisie judges contextually only after her attempts to act according to the symmetrical codes of ‘justice’ provided by the guardians fail. She imitates what she has seen and heard as long as she can” (183), and Julie Rivkin, who asserts that Maisie’s ability to thwart her parents’ attempt to use her as messenger develops “not because Maisie has begun to read the messages themselves but because she has learned to read their effects” (140).

seen, even when her presence would appear to be important” (548).³² It is precisely this knowledge of her own invisibility which forms the basis for Maisie’s construction of herself as a child in a world of battling adults.

The horror of Maisie’s new-found self-awareness gives way to a “pleasure new and keen” in the remedy of concealment, but where does this sense of pleasure come from? A later encounter with Sir Claude, in which Maisie’s cultivated idiocy is rewarded with the proclamation that she was “the perfection of a dunce” (James, *Maisie* 99) and subsequent silence on the part of her step-father, brings with it again this strange pleasure. The sensation is here related to a “crisis” which took place “ages before”, but which has not yet been directly mentioned in the text: “It brought again 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” (99). Shuttleworth suggests that Maisie’s “perverse” enjoyment of such abuse results from a pathological adaptation to the “psychological violence inflicted upon the child by these parents who use her only for their own ends” (333), and indicates pleasure taken “from the success of her deceitful stratagems which ensure her own alienation” (333). However, in light of Maisie’s awareness not only of what is expected of her in terms of her performed childhood, but also of the power she holds in the position of relative invisibility to which she is relegated by the adults around her, her reaction evinces a genuine sense of pleasure derived from the successful application of her “system” of vacancy.

More interesting than Maisie’s feeling of pleasure, then, is the memory of the

³² Another dissenting voice on this subject is John McCloskey’s, who suggests that Maisie’s “awareness of the position she holds in the parental hostility James describes as ‘literally a moral revolution.’ For it is the first time that Maisie understands that she has an inner self, which may function as an instrument of concealment” (488-9). He goes on to describe the event as “a phenomenon of self-awareness” (489) instead of a moral revolution, yet McCloskey, too, charts this as part of a wider journey of growth and development.

“crisis” that Sir Claude’s reaction recalls, the “moral revolution” that Maisie underwent long before, a fall from innocence and naivety which marks the beginning of her awareness. This fall is marked by a curious and disturbing description of “the stiff dolls on the dusky shelves [which] began to move their arms and legs” (18). This reference to living dolls is interesting in the context of Maisie’s own awakening: the unexpected movement of the inanimate toys is uncanny, the discovery of life within the lifeless forms evoking the unnerving possibility that their glassy eyes have been watching, comprehending all along. In their relationship with Maisie, Beale and Ida Farange, Sir Claude, Mrs Beale, and even Mrs Wix unconsciously make the almost automatic, and certainly unquestioned, decision to disregard the staring eyes of a doll. For such is Maisie in their perception. Despite the frequently voiced concerns over her corruptibility and Mrs Wix’s eventual obsession with her moral sense, for each of the adults in her life Maisie exists as little more than a prop, a lifeless doll who is not only immune to corruption, but who is incapable of monitoring or understanding their movements. This correlation between the dawning of Maisie’s awareness and the image of the living dolls calls to mind another element of the child’s monstrosity: in her transition from inanimate doll to living doll, she evokes the notion of automata.

I have already pointed out that Foster’s reading of Maisie’s limited self-awareness depicts her as a figure comparable to an automaton, and in the description of the moving dolls the idea presents itself within the text. However, the image of the animated doll which was sterilized in Lee’s “Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child” remains, in *Maisie*, fully saturated by the uncanny. The horror of the automaton, or “what makes an automaton monstrous,” as Zakiya Hanafi suggests, is “the fact that matter formed by artificial means and moving of its own volition would seem to be endowed with spirit” (54). Hanafi goes on to make a connection between the fear of

physical deformities and the fear of automata, identifying a shift from the former to the latter during the scientific Enlightenment in Italy. The nature of the relationship Hanafi describes is especially interesting in a consideration of Maisie's monstrosity: "the horror and fear provoked by appearances in nature of monstrous births moved over into the horror and fear provoked by our own artificial creations" (54). In both the deformed infant and the automaton the source of the anxiety is the same, tied to the act of creation and its offspring – the fear of the natural monster and that fear of the mechanical monster are both, in their essence, the fear of the monstrous child. The appearance of the animated dolls during Maisie's crisis of self-awareness is a significant allusion to this fear, a visual indicator of the unnerving possibility that our creations are watching us when we are not watching them.

To return to Maisie's moment of crisis: it is a revelation not only of her own position in the affairs of those around her, but of her invisibility within those affairs. She is, to once more borrow Hynes's phrasing, "aware of how often she herself is *not* seen". From this point on, she begins deliberately to develop a character which suits her newly recognised role; for the next three chapters novel openly depicts this construction, the last remnants of Maisie's development. Again the image of Maisie as a living, conscious doll is emphasised, as she works out her specific role in her parents' and step-parents' lives using her own relationship with her doll, Lisette: "Little by little, however, she understood more, for it befell that she was 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? In the presence of it she often imitated the shrieking ladies" (James, *Maisie* 29). It is telling that in her studies of the intricacies of adult society, Maisie places the inanimate doll in the role that she herself occupies. However, it is also in her interactions with Lisette that Maisie cultivates the protection of her own secret

inner world: “There were, for instance, days when, after a 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” (29). Given that Lisette occupies Maisie’s position as curious child in this fantastic relationship, it might be argued that Lisette’s failure to discover “all” alludes to Maisie’s own inability to uncover everything about the goings-on of her collective guardians. But the dynamic between Maisie and the doll differs from its real-life counterpart: Maisie, unlike her parents, step-parents, and governess, directly acknowledges her doll’s consciousness, and is completely aware of Lisette’s attempts to pry into her own goings-on. Her conversations with the doll are thus indicative of her deliberate retreat into a secret, inner world, and of the cultivation of an external appearance which will not give her away.³³

This is the last instance mentioned when Maisie really interacts with her toys or other symbols of childhood; from this point on, she becomes ensconced in the world of her guardians. It should be pointed out, furthermore, that the imagined interactions with Lisette take place in the final pages of the fifth chapter, after which the passive gaze with which Maisie observed the events taking place around her – watching them as she might a magic-lantern show – becomes an active, wondering gaze which is deliberately directed into the lives of the adults around her. This scene furthermore represents the final stage of Maisie’s development, after which point she remains fixed, an anomaly in the temporality of the novel. In a way, Maisie shares

³³ Susan Honeyman sees Maisie’s “secret inner world” as indicative of James’ attempt to tackle the problem of representation: “For Henry James, to whom authentic characterization was key, children posed a further challenge to credible representation, as he was intent on avoiding trespasses into unknowable subjectivities. James’ fictional children exemplify the complex challenge that children pose for fiction writers, and James openly admits that they are ever elusive, both representationally and narratively, even while seeming to legitimately represent them with fiction” (30). While it is certainly true that in *Maisie* James suggests “a shift in thinking about the unsocialized subject – from flatly knowable agent to complexly inaccessible outsider” (49), Honeyman’s conclusion that James engages with this question of representation purely in order to “dra[w] attention to the one-sided and unchecked power of adults constructing children” (67) overlooks the monstrous construction of Maisie as conscious, complex, inaccessible subject.

something of her temporality with Lee's Sister Benvenuta: unlike MacDonald and Pater, who disrupt a linear progression in order to create cyclical returns within their narratives, both Sister Benvenuta and Maisie are examples of the total disruption of linear development. Both represent a refusal to progress, yet where Sister Benvenuta's sustained childhood is described as a state almost to be envied for the qualities it bestows upon her, Maisie's stasis is concealed, an insidious presence which lies buried within the narrative itself. While the novel may follow her physical growth, an undeniable literal journey from childhood to adolescence, Maisie herself does not gain in knowledge or understanding, for this is an illusion advanced primarily by the mediation of events through the voice of a detached adult narrator.

If the reader allows herself to be persuaded to accept the New York Edition preface at face value, then the narrator's authority most likely goes similarly unquestioned. However, if the preface is read as consciously misleading or manipulative, then it sets up the possibility that the narrator should likewise be placed under suspicion. The preface makes the concession that

My first view of this neat possibility was as the attaching problem of the picture restricted (while yet achieving, as I say, completeness and coherency) to what the child might be conceived to have *understood* - to have been able to interpret and appreciate... 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. (7)

The solution James proposes to this supposed problem is to mediate Maisie's experience and understanding through a translating voice: "Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary... Maisie's terms accordingly play their part - since her simpler conclusions quite depend on them; but our own commentary constantly attends and amplifies" (7). Describing the narrator's mediation as a kind of

translation, and amplification, of Maisie's own perception creates the illusion that the result will be accurate, based on the narrator's direct representation, as of an existing text which he or she can access.

Typically, the criticism regarding *What Maisie Knew* has accepted this authority; Barbara Wall, for example, describes the narrator's role as "not only to allow us to see what Maisie sees, but also to direct us to see Maisie in a wider context... James' narrator slips inside Maisie's mind to record her thoughts" (235). Yet even while Wall acknowledges the distance between the narrator and his central subject, she accepts the narrator's ability to accurately read and report Maisie's state of mind:

James's narrator is primarily concerned not with what Maisie sees, but with what Maisie knows. So that we rarely, even to draw an ironic inference, look through Maisie's eyes to see what she sees; we look into her mind to discover what sense she has made of what she has seen. Although he keeps Maisie always at the centre of the story, James's real interest is in his narrator's interpretation of her experience. (235)

Even John McCloskey, who disagrees with the position that James "faithfully limit[s] his point of view to the child", suggesting that "this story is not truly psychological, for it is not told as if from within" (498 n.24), does not explore the implications of this gap between Maisie and her alleged interpreter. Shuttleworth, on the other hand, does approach the significance of the relationship between the two, noting that "[James] suggests that the adult narrator extends and amplifies the understanding of the child. The formulation, and methodology, leave open the question of the precise relationship between the perceptions of the child and the understanding of the adult narrator" (327). However, for Shuttleworth, the nature of this formulation and methodology leads "to the position where James can end his text with a return to the problem of how we interpret what Maisie 'knew'" (327). I would argue instead that the question posed by the nature of the relationship between Maisie and the narrator

is less how we interpret what Maisie knows, and more how we know Maisie. The preface's emphasis on the gaps and voids in Maisie's comprehension of the world around her overlooks any potential for the same kind of gaps in the narrator's understanding of Maisie herself. By ignoring the possibility that the narrator's ability to understand and represent Maisie may itself be flawed, and in citing the child's limited comprehension and vocabulary, the preface raises the prospect that adult mediation may face the same problems, undermining the need for an intermediary. Rather than clarifying and amplifying Maisie's understanding, the narrator only adds further confusion, exacerbating Maisie's isolation from the reader. Such mediation creates a veil of adult interpretations of children through which the reader's experience of Maisie is filtered.

It is apparent throughout the text that the narrator's own perception of the child whose experience he is meant to be translating is influenced by an assumption of innocence and ignorance not unlike that under which Maisie's guardians seem to be operating. When the possibility of Maisie's calculation arises, the narrator dismisses it: "Nothing was so easy to her as to send the ladies who gathered [at her mother's] off into shrieks, and she might have practised upon them largely if she had been of a more calculating turn" (James, *Maisie* 29). Yet, immediately following this attestation to Maisie's good nature, the child is seen practising her skills of concealment and manipulation with Lisette. Despite mediating the possibility of Maisie's calculating character with an 'if', it is the narrator who actually raises the idea itself; his attempt to dismiss it has the opposite effect of introducing it as a possibility. It is not a deliberate act on the narrator's part, merely one of the examples of how his narration occasionally demonstrates his fallibility when it comes to his representation of the child.

The narrator's biased view – based on his of Maisie as developing child –

provides the reader with a skewed perception of the child's supposed journey through to adolescence. Descriptions of her comprehension are prefaced with statements that this knowledge is tied to her age or developmental progress, as she comes to such realisations "in time" or becomes "old enough" to know or to understand. Maisie's guardians, and the narrator, engage with her in a manner that changes as she ages, allowing her a greater capacity for understanding and awareness over time which creates the illusion, from a reader's perspective, of a journey on Maisie's part. For the adults around her, and crucially, for the adult through whom she is presented to us, Maisie's knowledge, her awareness, relies on whether she is – in their eyes – "old enough" to understand any given fact or circumstance. Even where the narrator's own bias is not an influential factor, the mediation alone fosters the illusion that Maisie's experiences correlate to her maturation: "It may indeed be said that these days brought on a quickening of Maisie's direct perceptions, of her sense of freedom to make out things for herself" (65). Although the description suggests that Maisie is developing, the "quickenings" which takes place is attributed instead to a new-found freedom to interpret, more license to exercise the faculties already in place. Furthermore, this intensification of Maisie's perceptive abilities is related to her external circumstances, "helped" along by the prospect of a return to her father's. The "increase[d]... alarm" (65) that marks these days suggests that this quickening is the result of Maisie's expectation of "the hour that in troubled glimpses she had long foreseen, the hour when... she shouldn't know 'wherever' to go" (66), rather than any progression or development on her own part. The intensification that the word "quickenings" denotes is indicative of Maisie's sense of self-preservation, and her desire to retain her threatened place with Sir Claude; in this context the word resists a narrative of growth which it otherwise may have indicated.

Maisie's active manipulation of her role as child is much less successfully

concealed by the narrator, if it is concealed at all. True, her cultivation of “a hollowness beyond her years” (49), which is elsewhere referred to as “the effect she studied, the effect of harmless vacancy” (50), is referred to as a “pacific art” (49), but elsewhere it is overtly stated that if Maisie “spoiled their fun... she practically added to her own” (18). Although there are few specific instances in which Maisie’s practised art of stupidity is referred to, the studied effect of vacancy is carried throughout all of her interactions in the novel as Maisie affects an innocence or naivety in order to glean precious and useful knowledge. When we consider the reading of Maisie’s childhood as performance, and the nature of her audience, her refusal to submit to the death of her childhood becomes clear; it is in Maisie’s performed child-self that James lays the foundation for his construction of a monstrous childhood

ii. A Pantomime Performance of Childhood

According to Shuttleworth, James “suggests that childhood itself becomes, for his heroine, a form of performance” (325), and indeed that Maisie “spends her life trying to anticipate what form of response or behaviour is desired, or indeed required” (325). However, she identifies Maisie’s performance as one into which she is “locked”: “she can never initiate, only respond, and that only in ways which reinforce her parents’ wishes for an imperceptive idiocy in their offspring” (323). This assertion stands in contrast with the violent reaction to which Maisie is subjected in the face of what we might deem her opening performance, that episode referred to but never depicted in which Maisie is hurled down the stairs for her “imbecility”. Furthermore, I hope to show as my argument progresses that Maisie’s performance is not limited to response only. While Shuttleworth condemns Maisie to passivity in light of her performance, I believe Randall Craig strikes the right balance

when he suggests that “in order to overcome ‘the doom of a peculiar passivity’, [Maisie] begins to analyse performances of her guardians and to articulate her impressions. But never expressing directly what she knows, she is something of a pantomimist herself. Readers, then, are the audience to her performance” (211).

It is interesting that Craig chooses to describe Maisie’s performance specifically as a pantomime, for in the nineteenth century, as Martin Meisel points out in *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-century England* (1983), “transformation, and especially the animation of the inanimate, were essential to the pantomime genre” (99). Meisel notes this quality in the pantomimic elements of Dickens’ novels, as well as William Hogarth’s paintings and George Cruikshank’s drama, but it carries with it specific connotations in relation to Maisie’s own pantomime performance of childhood. Once more, the animation of the inanimate, that defining characteristic of the automaton, the living doll, is incorporated into the nature of “the child” as Maisie performs it. However Maisie’s pantomime is unique in that it is very much a performance directed towards a very specific audience, namely that of her guardians and governesses. In that context, it is actively manipulative, as I shall endeavour to show, although whether it should be tarred with the negative connotations of that word is not made clear even within the text itself. At best we can say that Maisie *is* a manipulative agent within the workings of her domestic circle; the nature of her manipulation is less obvious. However, as I shall demonstrate further on, the culmination of events in Boulogne and the revelation that Maisie has become, for her parents, monstrous, indicates that she connives to avoid the inevitable death of her childhood.

Although Maisie’s tactics stem from verbal manipulation, when direct curiosity seems inappropriate, Maisie makes good use of her peripheral position within adult society:

It was in the nature of things to be none of a small child's business, even when a small child had from the first been deluded into a fear that she might be only too much initiated. Things, then, were in Maisie's experience so true to their nature that questions were almost always improper; but she learned on the other hand soon to recognise how at last, sometimes, patient little silences and intelligent little looks could be rewarded by delightful little glimpses. (James, *Maisie* 102)

Maisie's ability to recognise the most effective way to gain information is directly tied to her understanding of the way she is perceived by her guardians. Indeed, the frequency with which the word "wonder" is attached to descriptions of Maisie's curiosity indicates the level of innocence with which she continues to imbue her questions, seemingly denuding them of any impropriety or precociousness. Interestingly, the notion that it is "in the nature of things to be none of a small child's business" is followed immediately by the strange phrase "even when a small child had from the first been deluded into a fear that she might be only too much initiated". The first assertion takes on an element of absurdity in light of the sheer number of questions which Maisie poses throughout the text, either vocally or internally, and which are, in either case, almost always answered to some degree. Yet the suggestion that Maisie has been "deluded" into the fear of already knowing too much might simultaneously indicate that the idea that she might have been already too much initiated is a delusion, or that the inclination to *fear* that very possibility has been without foundation. In either case, the phrasing in the passage suggests that the child's initiation into "things" which are none of its business is not necessarily a concern, that it either is to be already expected or that it is a singularity not to be feared – at least from the child's own perspective. It indicates that the child might recognise the deliberate attempt to delude them into the belief that certain forms of knowledge were "improper", again provoking anxieties regarding the knowing, but unknown, child figure. These anxieties are an integral part of Maisie's potential monstrosity, which I shall explore at length later on.

Whether her questions are improper or not, Maisie does ask them, and in such a way that her intrusion goes relatively unmarked. She encourages a degree of confidence with her guardians that defies her young age, and rarely do they find fault with this intimacy. In one instance Sir Claude, in overstepping some perceived boundary, “slightly coloured; he must have felt this profession of innocence to be excessive as addressed to Maisie... he wasn’t the man, he begged her to believe, falling once more, in spite of himself, into the scruple of showing the child he didn’t trip – to go [to Beale’s] without [her mother’s consent]” (54-5), but such moments of confusion or discomfort are uncommon. The methods by which she acquires information are kept secret even from the narrator: “It was singular perhaps after this that Maisie never put a question about Mr Perriam, and it was still more singular that by the end of a week she knew all she didn’t ask... It was extraordinary the number of things that, still without a question, Maisie knew by the time her stepfather came back from Paris” (63). The implication that such information has been gathered by way of Mrs Wix’s love of gossip is strong, but Maisie’s role as Mrs Wix’s confidante is due as much to the insinuation that Maisie’s moral contamination makes any further corruption impossible as to her unique position with regards to these events.

With each newly revealed piece of information Mrs Wix justifies the candid nature of her conversation by remarking on this fact: what Maisie does not know “ain’t worth mentioning” (66). Maisie’s ability to ingratiate herself into Mrs Wix’s confidence again relies on an unclear means of extracting information: “That put [Maisie and Mrs Wix] more than ever, in this troubled sea, in the same boat, so that with the consciousness of ideas on the part of her fellow mariner Maisie could sit close and wait. Sir Claude on the morrow came in to tea, and then the ideas were produced. It was extraordinary how the child’s presence drew out their full strength” (67). Like a charm designed to enhance clarity or intelligence, Maisie seems able to

rouse the minds of others by her mere presence; perhaps this effect is the consequence of what James intriguingly refers to in his notebooks as “the charm of the child” (*Notebooks* 166) – the double meaning of the word “charm” here becoming eerily appropriate. Yet if these proceedings appear to be marked by Maisie’s passivity – her position as a child once again casting her in the role of disengaged, inanimate doll – the sinister description that with her “consciousness of ideas” she “could sit close and wait” alludes to her power and agency.

Maisie’s methods of acquiring information from the world around her may appear passive, but in her accumulation of knowledge she stands in sharp contrast Pater’s Child in “The Child in the House”, for example, or Lee’s in “The Child in the Vatican”, or even MacDonald’s Diamond. Each of these characters is naïvely open to the world around him, observing and taking in impressions from his experiences, but not necessarily actively seeking to do so. Maisie, on the other hand, actively seeks out information through tactics that only appear passive; furthermore, she engages with that knowledge much more actively than the child figures constructed by Pater, Lee, and MacDonald; she does not simply allow herself to be impressed upon by the world around her, she seizes and uses the knowledge these impressions offer. Far more than in simply gathering facts about the lives of her parents and step-parents, it is in what information she chooses to reveal – and, crucially, when and to whom – that the child’s power over her guardians lies.

The narrative commentary which frames much of the dialogue in *Maisie* openly encourages the assumption that Maisie’s attempts to engage with the events surrounding her stem from an essentially innocent fount of childish curiosity, or else a desire to feel included and wanted. Yet it is also made clear that Maisie interprets the circumstances around her through a game-based discourse that consists of sides in conflict:

It had become now, for that matter, a question of sides... Maisie of course, in such a delicate position, was on nobody's; but Sir Claude had all the air of being on hers. If therefore Mrs. Wix was on Sir Claude's, her ladyship on Mr. Perriam's and Mr. Perriam presumably on her ladyship's, this left only Mrs. Beale and Mr. Farange to account for... It sounded, as this young lady thought it over, very much like puss-in-the-corner, and she could only wonder if the distribution of parties would lead to a rushing to and fro and a changing of places. (James, *Maisie* 63-4)

Although it appears an innocent enough allusion, especially for a child, the motif of games throughout the text is a significant one, and as such has not been ignored by critics. Still, despite the questions of agency raised by the passage, critical considerations of games in *Maisie* remain influenced by a dominant belief in the child's passivity, as in Hynes' statement that "Maisie is either spitefully thrown into the path of someone's pleasure, or seized as a means to the seizer's own pleasure" (529). Mitchell likewise describes Maisie as "the instrument, the victim, the ball in these games," (170) who is "confused about the nature of her centrality. Is the ball the victim of a game? Or is it by its very presence the cause of the game?" (175), while Hynes suggests that "for all their difficulty in coping with these games... Mrs Wix and Maisie take refuge in the supposed inevitability of Claude eventually providing a 'solution' to all the 'puzzles'" (529-30). However, the above passage from the novel carries with it no air of confusion or struggle to understand. Instead it indicates Maisie's awareness of her own place within the game, her own "delicate position" which precludes her from belonging to any particular side.

Not only is Maisie the only player who does not, and does not have to, choose sides, but she identifies others – namely Sir Claude and, through him, Mrs Wix – as being on hers. The construction appears paradoxical, but in fact fits the position filled by the chess-player: a bishop or a rook may be on a chess-player's side without the chess-player being on anyone's but their own. Maisie's sense of herself as assuming the "delicate position" of chess-player suggests that she is a

controller in the context of the game – she engages with the game mechanics but is not subject to the game itself. It is this role that she undertakes in her interactions with the adults around her. This consciousness is both masked and revealed by the narration, as in Maisie’s conversation with the Captain:

The Captain, at the same elevation as her ladyship, gaped wide... But he instantly caught himself up, echoing her bad words. ‘A damned old brute – your mother?’

Maisie was already conscious of her second movement. ‘I think she tried to make him angry.’

The Captain’s stupefaction was fine. ‘Angry – *she*? Why she’s an angel!’

On the spot, as he said this, his face won her over... He struck a note that was new to her and that after a moment made her say: ‘Do you like her very much?’

He smiled down at her, hesitating, looking pleasanter and pleasanter. ‘Let me tell you about your mother.’ (92-3)

What is supposedly an unintentional revelation that her stepfather has called her mother a “damned old brute” is subsequently exposed as a deliberate stratagem, an opening move consciously played with the intention of evoking a specific response. Such a manoeuvre contrasts with the events that follow, specifically Maisie’s dramatic reaction to the Captain’s praise of her mother; however, even Maisie’s seemingly innocent and uncontrollable emotional friability carries with it connotations of foresight and manipulation.

Maisie’s emotional response to the Captain’s assertion that Ida Farange is an angel and that she is “*true*” is described in great detail as a “revelation” which leaves her “indifferent to her usual fear of showing what in children was notoriously most offensive” (96), but the following statement that she “cried, with a pang, straight *at* him” (96) places her performance under suspicion. While MacDonald’s Diamond, and Lee’s Sister Benvenuta, and Pater’s Emerald Uthwart in particular, are all described as inherently passionate, loving deeply and responding emotionally as a matter of course to the world around them, Maisie is notably less open or impassioned. In fact, most instances of Maisie’s crying elicit a greater emotional

bond between the girl and the adult or adults in question, and have a controlling air about them. Bound up in Maisie's emotional outpourings is the repeated insistence that the Captain admit his love for her mother, and when her initial question is met with "a queer blurred look" and an evasive response – "I'm tremendously fond of her – I like her better than any woman I ever saw" (96) – she ignores his obvious anxiety. Although Maisie is said to receive this profession as "an almost unbelievable balm", her agitation increases and she sobs into her hands, "say you love her, Mr. Captain; say it, say it!" at which point the Captain surrenders and complies.

A similarly questionable exchange of emotion takes place between Maisie, Sir Claude, and Mrs Wix earlier in the novel. As Mrs Wix attempts to convince Sir Claude to abscond with both herself and her charge, leaving Ida and Mrs Beale behind completely, Maisie sits unnaturally silent. Yet her physical place is quite clearly depicted: she is "enclosed in Mrs. Wix's arms", the two "interlocked" (68) in opposition to Sir Claude. Still, Maisie manages to draw his gaze, and "something in the way she met [his eyes] caused him to chuck her playfully under the chin" (70), and shortly afterwards he opens his arms to her and she is transferred to his hold as he commits to "stick to [her] through everything" (70). This engagement is then "sealed by all their tears" – a pact instigated by Maisie who, in response, "buried her head on his shoulder and cried without sound and without pain. While she was so engaged she became aware that his own breast was agitated, and gathered from it with rapture that his tears were silently flowing. Presently she heard a loud sob from Mrs. Wix" (71). Throughout the conversation Maisie is positioned physically as a pawn to be passed between the two, and her role as passive spectator is heavily emphasised, almost to the point of parody:

The sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child's main support, the long habit... of seeing herself in discussion and finding in the fury of it – she had had a glimpse of the game of football – a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave her often an

odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass. (70)

Yet it is Maisie who has been declared the inspiration for the idea that “whenever... they should seek refuge Sir Claude should consent to share their asylum” (67), it is her look that is responsible for Sir Claude’s promise, rather than Mrs Wix’s arguments, and it is her tears that draw the three into a sealed “engagement”.

The description of Maisie detached spectator and the insinuation that she may also be a tactician, and a shrewd one, is potentially paradoxical; certainly her position as observer has often been read as evidence of her passivity, and her exclusion from the events which take place *around* her and yet do not seem to involve her. Even McCloskey notes that “[Maisie] sees clearly enough what is there, but she continues passive, still a recorder of impressions and now a drawer of inferences, an acute onlooker, but not yet an actor” (496). And yet the nature of Maisie’s spectatorship undoubtedly corresponds to her active manipulation. The novel’s description of Maisie’s position of observer, which is noted as “the child’s main support” (James, *Maisie* 70), indicates that she experiences a vicarious thrill through watching the events that unfold around her, like crowds at a football match. And like any audience, Maisie – in her consciousness of this relationship – exerts some level of influence on the proceedings. Yet her power exceeds that of the audience in two ways. The first is again tied to her relative invisibility; since the players before her are as yet unaware of the conscious gaze directed upon them, the controlling figure remains Maisie herself. Secondly, although the narrator again emphasises Maisie’s separation, her distance, and her passivity, she is still, in her role of observer, “getting at” experience. Despite the fact that Maisie’s situation in the adult conflicts around her is constructed according to a model of passive spectatorship, the description once again indicates that Maisie is able to occupy an

apparently passive position without abandoning either her advantage or her agency.

If Maisie's method of "getting at" experience seems to preclude her from taking an active role in her surroundings, it should be noted that this is the position she assumes while "wait[ing] for the effect of Mrs Wix's eloquence" (70). Maisie's waiting is not in any way an example of passivity. Prior to the conversation itself she knowingly "sit[s] close and wait[s]" (67) for the events to unfold, and here again she waits: for Maisie, waiting is an act, and one which is linked to expectation and anticipation. Her awareness of the situation taking place before her means that she does not need to involve herself directly; Maisie can wait silently, observe distantly, and yet by understanding the circumstances entirely without revealing the extent of her awareness she retains a level of control over the events. Sir Claude does not "keep her long in a position so ungraceful" (70), and responds as expected, and it remains only for Maisie to invoke and exploit her role as a child, binding the three in agreement.

It is interesting that Maisie is positioned as a possession to be passed between, or shared by, Sir Claude and Mrs Wix during this confrontation, because in comparison to the other primary adult influences in her life it is with these two that Maisie is most successful in her manipulation. The power of Maisie's influence becomes more visible towards the novel's close through repetition, particularly in the case of her relationship with Sir Claude. Repetition characterises many of their exchanges throughout the text, but it is most obvious preceding or following moments of confrontation, as when the two discover Ida Farange and the Captain in Kensington Gardens:

'Why mercy – if it isn't mamma!'
Sir Claude paused with a stare. 'Mamma? But mamma's at Brussels.'
Maisie, with her eyes on the lady, wondered. 'At Brussels?'
...
'Then this is Lord Eric?'
For a moment her companion made no answer, and when she turned

her eyes again to him he was looking at her, she thought, rather queerly. 'What do you know about Lord Eric?' She tried innocently to be odd in return. 'Oh, I know more than you think! Is it Lord Eric?' she repeated. (89)

Foster describes this marked tendency towards repetition in their conversations as "the seduction of the mirror", suggesting that Maisie becomes a linguistic mirror for Sir Claude, performing the function with such success that he "talks all the more to experience it" (211); Honeyman reads it instead as a means of emphasising "the one-sided authority and focus of adult-child consciousness" (35). Yet the repetition is embedded within a description which implies that it is part of a deliberate attempt "to be odd", a performance consciously constructed in response to Sir Claude's own mood in that situation. While Sir Claude's repetition is a mindless echo, Maisie's once again is marked by self-awareness: it is either an act or part of her wonder, which, as I have mentioned previously, is itself an active rather than passive experience for Maisie.

Following yet another confrontation – this time between Ida and Maisie – Maisie and Sir Claude's conversation is again marked by repetition, and again the echoes illustrate the child's power over her step-father, even though in this case it is not he who echoes. Sir Claude, in fact, begins the exchange, proclaiming,

'I'm free – I'm free.'
[Maisie] looked up at him... 'You're free – you're free.'
'Tomorrow we go to France.' He spoke as if he hadn't heard her; but it didn't prevent her again concurring.
'Tomorrow we go to France.'
Again he appeared not to have heard her; and after a moment – it was an effect evidently of the depth of his reflections and the agitation of his soul – he also spoke as if he had not spoken before. 'I'm free – I'm free!'
She repeated her form of assent. 'You're free – you're free.' (James, *Maisie* 140-1)

Although Sir Claude is, in this case, the one initiating each repetition, which might suggest that he is controlling Maisie's voice rather than the other way around, he is once more speaking from a disadvantaged position in relation to his charge.

Sir Claude's half of the dialogue demonstrates that he does not recognise, or is slowly coming to recognise, the situation around him. He repeats his own exclamations repeat as if searching for understanding, while Maisie's echo is one of agreement, an affirmation; she speaks to assure or convince him that what he says is so, coming as she does from a position of knowledge and understanding that Sir Claude has been denied. Furthermore, the gaps and pauses in these conversations between the two – the first in Kensington Gardens and the second in Folkestone – indicate, as often with James, where exactly the power lies. In both passages, pauses mark Sir Claude's speech as he struggles to take in the implications of the exchanges as they unfold. Maisie's awareness of the game being played was cemented long ago, and has remained consistent throughout. In contrast, Sir Claude's reaction to his disentanglement from Ida indicates, as does his sharp response to Maisie's refusal to share details of her conversation with the Captain, that his grasp of the larger picture is unsure, his understanding of his own part in relation to it constantly in flux.

Of course, Maisie's manipulation of Sir Claude is more active than the mere recognition of a disparity in their respective awareness; during their time in France, in particular, she is described as engaging far more openly in a conscious performance, and refusing or sharing information she deems necessary. Upon being asked whether Mrs Wix had attempted to "affect" her decision to stay with Sir Claude and Mrs Beale, Maisie "felt the weight of the question. It kept her silent for a space during which she looked at Sir Claude, whose eyes remained bent. 'Nothing.' she returned at last" (195). When pressed further, "it seemed to Maisie that she had tried too little as to be scarce worth mentioning; again therefore an instant she shut herself up. Presently she found her middle course. 'Mrs Beale likes her now... she was tremendously kind all day yesterday'" (195-6). And so the discussion ends without Maisie having revealed any information regarding Mrs Wix's interference,

and with Sir Claude apologetic for his interrogation. It may seem at first glance that Maisie's methods have matured somewhat from those she used to antagonise Sir Claude after her conversation with the Captain, that in deftly changing the direction of the conversation she has learned how to evade adults' questions more delicately. Yet there has not been any alteration on Maisie's part – still she relies on silence, and indeed repeats the very same non-committal phrase, “Oh I don't know!”, in both instances. During the second confrontation, the narrator echoes her reliance on silence with the specific, and distinctly awkward, phrase “she shut herself up” (195). What has changed between the two situations is Sir Claude.

In the former interaction, although his curt behaviour and anger can be explained by the confrontation with Ida, Sir Claude is constructed as a parental figure, compared directly to images of Ida and Beale throughout. In Maisie's world, parentage is accompanied by rage and bitterness, and she is immediately aware of her situation, of the fact that “she could only face doggedly the ugliness of seeming disagreeable” (99). In the latter encounter, Sir Claude very deliberately approaches Maisie as an old chum, but yet again she recognises that

The fact that they were together in a shop, at a nice little intimate table as they had so often been in London, only made greater the difference of what they were together about. The difference was in his face, in his voice, in every look he gave her and every movement he made....his fear was in his jesting postponing perverting voice; it was just in this make-believe way he had brought her out to imitate the old London playtimes, to imitate indeed a relation that had wholly changed. (194-5)

The seeming development of Maisie's relationship with Sir Claude does not indicate any maturation on the part of the heroine, but is instead an illusion created by the way in which Sir Claude responds to *her*. Maisie's success in manipulating her step-father is not the result of years spent mimicking her guardians, but is instead the product of her early epiphanic recognition of her inconsequence in their eyes. That is not to say that Maisie's manipulative abilities are absolute, or that they are perpetual.

The novel's final pages depict the failure of Maisie's performance, and the onset of a second major crisis which threatens to lead to yet another moral revolution.

Perhaps two of the most revelatory passages in *Maisie* – in terms of Maisie's own character – are those which outline her final encounter with first her father, then her mother. In each she is presented with the option of remaining with that parent; each is resolved with her return to her step-parents and the tantalising suggestion of a financial transaction. More importantly, each also reveals the failure of Maisie's performance and alludes to the monstrosity ingrained in her construction of herself as child figure.³⁴ In her confrontation with Beale, this failure and its cause are referenced directly by Maisie herself, who realises that she has “grown for him, since the last time he had, as it were, noticed her, and by increase of years and of inches if by nothing else, [she was] much more of a little person to be reckoned with” (112). Not only is Maisie aware of how she has physically matured, but she is aware that her father's perception that she has grown “[by] years and [by] inches if... nothing else” – the phrase “nothing else” is a crucial one here – has affected Beale's perception of, and treatment of, his daughter.

Yet even this awareness does not necessarily secure the success of Maisie's performance, although the chapter closes with the suggestion that it has: “She would have pretended with ecstasy if he could only have given her the cue. She waited for it... and as if, though he was so stupid all through, he had let the friendly suffusion of her eyes yet tell him she was ready for anything, he floundered about, wondering what the devil he could lay hold of” (113). If Beale begins the conversation in a state of confusion over how to regard his child, he quickly finds himself on much surer ground. Despite Maisie's attempts to “appear more as he would like her” by agreeing

³⁴ Of course, on the surface both confrontations also reveal the monstrosity of her parents and her situation, a fact which has been discussed by Muriel Shine, Edward Wasiolek, and Joseph Hynes in greater detail, each exploring the varying degrees of success with which Maisie's childhood innocence and goodness survive (or do not) each encounter.

to “do anything in the world you ask me, papa”, Beale immediately responds with the recognition that “that’s a way, my dear, of saying ‘No, thank you!’ You know you don’t want to go the least little mite. You can’t humbug *me!*” (115). The statement that Maisie cannot “humbug” Beale is not only the first instance of awareness that Maisie might be trying to manipulate, but also the first instance in which it fails. Where Beale once stood with a “fidgety look” (114), floundering about, Maisie is now the one left nervous, “momentarily bewildered” as she develops the “sharp impression of what he now really wanted to do... embarrass her into admitting that what would really suit her little book would be, after doing so much for good manners, to leave her wholly at liberty to arrange for herself” (116).

It is interesting that as this turning of the tables takes place between the two, Maisie is conscious of feeling “as if [Beale] were looking at her very hard indeed, and also as if she had grown ever so much older” (115). The relationship between the intensity of Beale’s look and Maisie’s feeling that she has grown older is not a chance association, nor is it an indication of Maisie’s maturation. Rather, it further suggests a change in the way that Beale sees his daughter, not the least part of which is the fact that he sees her at all. As the interaction continues, Maisie finds herself placed “in the middle of the room again while her father moved slowly about her” (118), her position static, as unchanging as she herself is within the role of the child, while Beale moves around *her*. It is a perfect visual representation of the changing dynamic between the two. As Maisie has grown physically older, Beale’s perception of her has developed so that, no longer relegating her to the exiled position of the child-spectator, he places her on the board along with himself and the other players. Once Beale has done so, Maisie’s ability to control the information is stolen from her, as her father guesses quite astutely her pretences and plans. As the child murmurs helplessly, his response is to chastise, “I know what you’re up to – don’t

tell *me!*” (116), and it is not long before he comes out with the correct deduction that she has “settled it with the other pair” (117). The confrontation between the two concludes with Beale’s evident disgust at Maisie’s continued attempt to retain her role as detached child-spectator, and, culminates in his emphatic statement that “you’re a monster... they’ve *made* one of you” (117).

Maisie’s monstrosity is a result, in Beale’s eyes, of her corruption by her adulterous step-parents, but the true cause is perhaps more clearly revealed through her final interaction with Ida in Folkestone. Mrs Farange initiates the exchange with a view of her daughter as an inconsequential child, “as if she had said in so many words: ‘There have been things between us – between Sir Claude and me – which I needn’t go into, you little nuisance, because you wouldn’t understand them.’ 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” (134). Yet even here, Ida’s assumption that Maisie has remained ignorant and simple is itself a convenient performance, and she later admits to the child that “I dare say you know things that, if I did (I mean if I knew them), would make me – well, no matter! You’re old enough at any rate to know that there are a lot of things I don’t say that I easily might” (136). Ida reveals that, like Beale, she has also come to recognise Maisie’s awareness of the circumstances surrounding her, and furthermore has identified Maisie’s age as a sufficient reason to excuse a greater confidence in the child. Maisie has, for Ida, finally become ‘old enough’.

The fact that Ida’s eventual offer of money comes freely and without the pretext of the cab’s cost also signifies that she has placed Maisie within the world of commercial exchange and commodification which is associated with adults in numerous ways throughout the novel: as Peggy McCormack points out, “Maisie is surrounded with men and women who buy each other” (53). Now, it seems, Ida has

marked her daughter as one of those women who can be bought. Maisie's initiation into an economic world can be contrasted with that of MacDonald's Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind*. Although Diamond's entry into symbolic, communicative language is mirrored by his entrance into the economic marketplace – replacing his ill father as a London cab driver – this entrance is never complete. Diamond fails to appreciate the nature of the economic world where he has set foot and never himself accumulates any capital. Once his father is well, Diamond returns to his child-like naivety and his world is devoid of financial transaction once more.

In fact, Pater's, Lee's, and MacDonald's child figures all exist in worlds that lack any economic markers. As Vane escapes to the fantastic world beyond his attic mirror in *Lilith*, he leaves behind him the recent inheritance to which he has gained access upon turning of age, a fact which is directly referred to by the narrator prior to Vane's first encounter with Mr. Raven (MacDonald, *Lilith* 5). The world to which he escapes is one in which riches are associated only with Bulika and the Bags, and in both cases the allusion is a negative one. Aside from these two instances, *Lilith's* fantasy land is, like Pater's and Lee's childhood spaces, without any clear economic structure. However, although Ida's attempt to initiate her daughter into a consumerist, capitalist adult world fails, individuals do not just "buy each other" by means of financial capital in *What Maisie Knew*. McCormack notes that "like material products, verbal and behavioral messages assume both use and exchange values... For most Jamesian characters, talking is a capitalist enterprise aimed at profit" (3). In *Maisie* in particular, the power, the value of speech and conversation is eclipsed only by the power of knowledge. As we have seen, conversation throughout the novel is dominated by questions of who knows what, what information is divulged, when, and how. If knowledge, in *Maisie*, is equated with economic capital, then surely it is the eponymous child herself who has the largest share.

Alfred Habegger suggests that at its heart, *What Maisie Knew* is a novel defined by reciprocity, with Maisie's genuine eagerness "to reciprocate imagined gifts and sacrifices" contrasted with "a world of greedy adults, who try to get as much as they can through corrupt bargains and pacts" (458). Yet if we consider the positioning of knowledge as exchange capital in the text, then it is not just the adults who "try to get as much as they can", and Maisie's eagerness to reciprocate is cast in a far less innocent light. Maisie stands apart from other literary child figures in her conscious and successful engagement with the economic system of the novel. She participates in the accumulation and manipulation of knowledge, and more importantly, demonstrates an awareness of the value of that particular capital which does not quite seem to register with her adult companions. Ida's crumpled banknotes, then, though they never reach their recipient, are not indicative of Maisie's entry into an economic structure which she has previously been denied, but of Ida's own developing perception of her daughter.

Although Ida's behaviour with regards to her daughter has not changed in any significant way, despite becoming somewhat less violent, the possibility of a financial transaction between Ida and Maisie indicates that Mrs Farange's perception of her child has been influenced by Maisie's physical maturation. She, too, has come to see Maisie as an active player in the manoeuvres being executed. And as with Beale, Maisie misjudges her position: her "deep diplomacy" is ruffled by the potential offer of money and all it represents, "to the point of making her forget that she had never been safe unless she had also been stupid. She in short forgot her habitual caution in her impulse to adopt her ladyship's practical interests and show her ladyship how perfectly she understood them" (136). Ida's generosity is checked by Maisie's subsequent reference to the Captain, but it is not this reference alone which causes Ida to view her daughter with horror; rather, it is the contest between

the two which takes place as a result.

As Maisie “falters supremely”, her mother is described as towering over her, “and in the gathering dusk the whites of her eyes were huge” (138). In response, however, Maisie fixes her mother with a glare that “could by this time pretty well match [Ida’s]’ and she had at least now, with the first flare of anger that had ever yet lighted her face for a foe, the sense of looking up quite as hard as anyone could look down”. Rattled by her sudden transition from the well-charted waters of peripheral childhood to a world of bank notes and commodities formerly populated only by the adults in her life, Maisie falters in her performance and, as a result, finds herself meeting Ida with Ida’s own eyes. What follows is the admission that Maisie has had intimations and understandings, even hopes, regarding her mother’s affairs; for Ida it is the equivalent of looking into the eyes of a doll and finding for the first time that they are looking back. It is the discovery that Maisie has been fully aware of the intrigues and complexities of her guardians and that the stupidity of which she had so often been accused was a deliberate, practised front that causes Ida to call her daughter “you little horror” and a “dreadful, dismal, deplorable little thing” (138).

In the aftermath of this traumatic clash between her long-cultivated expertise within the role of the child the danger posed by her advancing age, Maisie is haunted by an image which occupies what was Ida’s place, but this ghostly vision “had ceased to be her mother only, in the strangest way, that it might become her father... It was a presence with vague edges – it continued to front her, to cover her” (138). Maisie is confronted not by the parents who have abandoned her to seek their own pleasure, but by the failure of the carefully constructed identity which had so long been both her method of control and her defence. The vision is dispelled by the timely entry of Sir Claude, and when Maisie relates Ida’s thwarted generosity, he responds with laughter. Despite the fact that the two of them spend the remainder of

the evening participating in a variety of grown-up activities – smoking after dinner, in particular – by the time they find themselves occupying the same position as Maisie and Ida a few hours earlier, Sir Claude has rejected the idea of Maisie as an entrant into the adult world of financial affairs. This rejection precedes the exchange of echoes discussed above: placing Maisie firmly within the position of the child, Sir Claude enables her to retain her role as overseeing chess-master, for the time being at least, before launching into the echoed chorus, “I’m free – I’m free!” (140).

Yet even Sir Claude eventually forces Maisie outside of her comforting child role, confronting her directly in France with exactly the same proposal as her mother and father, handing her as they did the level of explicit agency in the decisions affecting her life which she has been denied for most of it: “That came to me yesterday, in London.... ‘Go straight over and put it to her: let her choose, freely, her own self.’ So I do, old girl – I put it to you. *Can you choose freely?*” (200). And in the end, she never really does, excepting perhaps the spontaneous and impractical impulse to take a last-minute train to Paris which is quashed by Sir Claude’s own indecision. The decision is, of course, made for her in the end: as Hynes points out, “Mrs. Wix does not ‘win’ Maisie. Something other and more complex than a victory for Mrs. Wix’s ‘moral sense’ accounts for the ultimate twosomes – Maisie goes to Mrs. Wix by a kind of default. There is no place else – in this fretful search for the right place to live – for Maisie to go” (543). Hynes’ assertion that Maisie’s eventual pairing with Mrs Wix is the result of “something other and more complex than a victory” on the part of Mrs Wix is accurate, but I would refute the implication that Maisie is a victim of circumstance, with no control over her future situation, or, as Hynes elsewhere suggests, that Maisie is rewarded for her renunciation of temptations, for “choos[ing] nothing except not to decide” (31). Maisie finds herself with Mrs Wix in the end because it is with Mrs Wix that she is able to remain safe

within her constructed performance of childishness. Even Sir Claude turns to her as an agent in her own affairs, and Mrs Beale, in their final encounter, faces Maisie more as a rival than as a step-mother. It is only Mrs Wix who retains her sense of Maisie as a child to be moulded and shaped, who refuses to see her as a truly active participant in the events that unfold. There is a moment when this dynamic faces a crisis, where Maisie's performance stands on the edge of failure even with her governess, yet with Mrs Wix more than with any other adult in her life Maisie is able to adjust her self-as-child identity to accommodate a changed perception.

As Maisie and Mrs Wix face off over the child's "moral sense", or lack thereof, the mechanics of Maisie's performance are more openly described than at any other point in the novel. Maisie reflects on the impact of her words, and crucially, of her echoes; her pauses are described as "more for apparent consideration than from any impulse to yield too easily" (165). Yet with all this concentrated effort she still finds herself obstructed at every turn as Mrs Wix reveals herself "indeed, for the first time, sharp" (166), and professes to Maisie that "if Sir Claude's old enough to know better, upon my word I think it's right to treat you as if you also were" (164). Mrs Wix does not admit to believing that Maisie is old enough to know better, to seeing her as anything other than a child as yet, but only to wishing to treat her *as if* she were. The importance of this slight difference is clarified as the two return to the question the following morning with Mrs Wix's blunt accusation, "Haven't you really and truly *any* moral sense?" (168). At this point, Maisie consciously slips back into her well-practised method of affected idiocy, reflecting that "this was the first time she had appeared to practise with Mrs Wix an intellectual inaptitude to meet her – the infirmity to which she had owed so much success with papa and mamma" (168). This success is, with those two at least, referred to in the past sense, but it is a new effort in her interactions with Mrs Wix, the first time the child has had to

directly affect an appearance of vacancy with the governess. Mrs Wix's overwhelming desire to see Maisie as a child, whether innocent or corrupt, has made the deliberate idiocy that was part of Maisie's childhood performance for her parents unnecessary for the governess until this time. This is not to say that Maisie has not been performing the role of childhood for Mrs Wix, for in the sense that she anticipates what the governess expects from a child and delivers it, she has; the addition of an "intellectual inaptitude" to this performance is the result of a change in Mrs Wix's expectations.

Maisie works her talents to great effect here, beginning without any real understanding of what Mrs Wix means by "moral sense", but gradually coming to "strike up a sort of acquaintance" with it "with scarce an outward sign save her surrender to the swing of the carriage" (168). Still, despite the fact that this question of moral sense seems to be one of the few things which Maisie does not understand about the situation as it unfolds around her, she manages in the end to "come out with something which should be a disproof of her simplicity" (171) – an ironic goal given her initial aim of appearing "vague even to imbecility" (168). This shift in approach takes place again as Mrs Wix asks Maisie whether or not it had ever occurred to her to be jealous of Mrs Beale (172), a prospect which we are told "never had in the least [occurred to her]; yet the words were scarce in the air before Maisie had jumped at them. She held them well, she looked at them hard; at last she brought out with an assurance which there was no one, alas, but herself to admire: 'Well, yes – since you ask me.' She debated, then continued: 'Lots of times!'" (172). In both instances Maisie is instantly aware of the responses expected of her, of the role that Mrs Wix wants her to step in to, just as with her father she "understood as well as if he had spoken it that what he wanted, hang it, was that she should let him off with all the honours – with all the appearance of virtue and sacrifice on his side" (116).

However, Mrs Wix, whose engagement with Maisie is still to some extent filtered through her perception of the girl as a small child, does not reject Maisie's efforts to manipulate as Beale does; instead she offers a look of approval, though still tempered by some suspicion (172). Maisie, naturally, is aware that her governess "still believed her moral sense to be interested and feigned", and in a desperate bid to ensure that Mrs Wix accepts Maisie's moral sense without question, faces her challenge directly, "as if it were a game with forfeits for winking. 'I'd *kill* her!' That at least, she hoped as she looked away, would guarantee her moral sense" (173). And, in yet another emotional display in which Maisie makes out "straighteners all blurred with tears which after a little seemed to have sprung from her own eyes" (173) it seems that her moral sense is confirmed, and that Mrs Wix believes herself to have been responsible for evoking it.³⁵

This level of success in a confrontation which places her performance in crisis is not realised with either her parents or step-parents. As the dramatic argument unfolds regarding who will give up whom, and where, in the end, Maisie will find herself, Sir Claude requests that Maisie give up Mrs Wix, and she agrees on condition that he must give up Mrs Beale. Although Sir Claude's entreaty does not stem from any particular manipulation on the part of his step-daughter, Maisie foreshadowed the prospect of choosing between Sir Claude and Mrs Wix long before. In a conversation with Mrs Wix, Maisie clearly asserts her intention to go with "Him alone or nobody." "Not even *me*?" cried Mrs Wix. Maisie looked at her a moment, then began to undress. "Oh, you're nobody!" (185). True to her words, Maisie finds herself forced to choose between Sir Claude or "nobody", and in the end she leaves in the company of the latter. The choice before her seems to be less a

³⁵ As David Foster notes, "Maisie reads Mrs. Wix correctly and produces the effect she wants" (210); however, for Foster, as for others like Johnson and McCloskey, Maisie's success is related to the fact that she "does not learn the conventional moral position, but the particular moral logic of her teacher" (210).

question of the individual with whom she will reside than of the role she shall choose to fulfil.

Maisie's second crisis is best symbolised by the books she carries with her on her return with Sir Claude to the hotel where the final battle will take place – the pink books indicating her lingering childhood and the yellow suggestive of the onset of adolescence and her burgeoning sexuality.³⁶ But the yellow books also suggest a loss of control, the relinquishing of her role as behind-the-scenes observer for one whose expectations and parameters she cannot yet fathom. Maisie's final offer to Sir Claude to go with him and give up Mrs Wix if he will do the same with Mrs Beale follows her lengthy consideration of his fear of the latter: "She seemed to see at present, to touch across the table, as if by laying her hand on it, what he had meant when he confessed on those several occasions to fear. Why was such a man so often afraid? It must have begun to come to her now that there was one thing just such a man above all could be afraid of. He could be afraid of himself" (194). Immediately following her proposal, she muses that "he was afraid of his weakness – of his weakness" (206). Both observations suggest the unlikelihood of her step-father ever giving up Mrs Beale. By making her proposal in the aftermath of the missed train, the result of Sir Claude's paralysed inaction, Maisie effectively chooses Mrs Wix. Perhaps more accurately, she chooses the path by which Mrs Wix will come to choose her.

The final confrontation in which Maisie's fate is decided is marked largely by indecision on the part of the heroine herself. As allegiances are forged and broken, and she is called upon to decide with which guardian she will live, Maisie stays largely silent as the debates rage around her. The most passionate of the few instances in which Maisie does engage with the proceedings is her vehement denial

³⁶ See Lowe (194), which offers a more extensive examination of the significance of colour in the novel, reading it as a contributing factor in the representation of Maisie's "developing consciousness and her improvement rather than her corruption" (194).

of the allegation that she *has*, in fact, made a decision. The image which emerges from the confrontation is that of Maisie “sinking” under the eye of her examiners as she finds that “the only thing was the old flat shameful schoolroom plea. ‘I don’t know – I don’t know’” (211). The schoolroom dynamic is emphasised by repeated references to Maisie as a pupil, and allusions to examinations, textbooks, and missed lessons, as she firmly steps away from the prospect of making a decision and buries herself in a child’s world that is built entirely around Mrs Wix as headmistress. Although her plea is specifically a response to her inability to decide whether or not she has any moral sense, it indirectly demonstrates that Maisie has chosen the decision which Mrs Wix shall make for her: Maisie’s figurative return to the schoolroom indicates that the child has already elected to stay with her governess.

Mrs Wix overlooks Maisie’s proposition to Sir Claude to give up her governess, and shortly afterwards announces, “I despaired of her... I thought she had left me... You were *with* them – in their connection. But now your eyes are open, and I take you!” (213). And so she does. Even the novel’s concluding lines are indicative of the agency that Maisie has exerted in the proceedings, as she and Mrs Wix push off for Folkestone:

‘I didn’t look back, did you?’
 ‘Yes. He wasn’t there,’ said Maisie.
 ‘Not on the balcony?’
 Maisie waited a moment; then, ‘He wasn’t there,’ she simply said again.
 Mrs Wix was also silent a while. ‘He went to *her*,’ she finally observed.
 ‘Oh, I know!’ the child replied.
 Mrs Wix gave a sidelong look. She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew.” (216)

Maisie’s “Oh, I know!” suggests not only that she is aware that Sir Claude has chosen Mrs Beale, but also that he would always do so. Although Shuttleworth suggests that the conclusion sees Maisie “demot[e] herself, once more, to a mere child in the charge of her homely governess” (334), on the contrary, Maisie has

simply refused the progression to adulthood, refused to relinquish her identity as “mere child”. She has left in the company of Mrs Wix because it is only with Mrs Wix that she can continue to project her performative childhood. Not only does Maisie remain a static character throughout the text, aware and active and manipulative in her role as the invisible, conscious child, but she refuses to step outside of that role, rejecting the death of childhood that is a necessary part of natural development.

iii. The Monstrosity of the Un-dead Child

The notion that Maisie has deliberately chosen the outcome in France brings us back again to the loaded term, ‘monstrous’, from the preface to the novel, and to the question of just what James is here designating as monstrous. The answer depends entirely on the ambiguous use of the word itself in both the novel and the preface; of course the circumstances in which Maisie is placed at the beginning of the text are frightening and grotesque, and only become more so as her family situation unravels. In a way, it is monstrous. However, as we chart the so-called development of the child herself it is clear that the depiction of events – and specifically of Maisie’s reaction to, and understanding of them – by a narrator who becomes increasingly untrustworthy is responsible for the unease which pervades the novel, rather than the child’s circumstances.

The narrator’s translation of Maisie, his indebtedness to a pre-existing perception of the child figure akin to that of the adult characters in the novel, and the unsettling effect this has on the reader’s understanding of the child have already been discussed. And just as Maisie’s parents and step-parents’ perception of the girl gradually develops throughout the text, so does the narrator’s. By the time the child has reached the point of her confrontation with Mrs Wix regarding her moral sense,

the previously omniscient narrator finally falters, and in a breach of the fourth wall addresses the reading audience directly to admit, “I so despair of courting her noiseless mental footsteps that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time forward a picture literally present to her... I am not sure that Maisie had not even a dim discernment of the queer law of her own like that made her educate to that sort of proficiency those elders with whom she was concerned” (James, *Maisie* 169). For the first time the narrator confesses to his or her own inability to access the child’s mind: Maisie’s “noiseless mental footsteps” are revealed as impenetrable, and the narrator’s description is based on interpretation and opinion – “I am not sure” – no different from that of the other characters or a prospective reader herself.

This use of the first person by the narrator, according to Barbara Eckstein, “place[s] the narrator in the text as a character who need no longer, indeed can no longer, maintain his posture as flawless articulator of Maisie’s experience” (179); it also, she states, “unveils the narrator as a subject himself” (181). The narrator’s subjectivity has not necessarily been actively concealed by the text – Merla Wolk points out that “two distinct personalities are in evidence – that of the witty, knowledgeable narrator and that of the vulnerable, innocent child” (201). Yet it has not, up to this point, been openly announced either: the text deliberately attempts to create the illusion, which Wolk evidently finds successful, that “[the two personalities’] perspectives are perfectly joined” (201). What, then, is the significance of revealing at this point the narrator’s fallibility – indeed, as Honeyman points out, the author’s fallibility – in accurately representing the shadowy landscape that is child consciousness? Pearson reads this passage as Maisie “unsettl[ing] the narrator’s moral and aesthetic authority... Sometimes, then, the narrator’s abilities to articulate, just like Maisie’s to understand (or at least to see passively), are not up to the mark. Like the overabundance of material, this void threatens to undermine the

narrator's authority" (83). It is interesting that this move towards a subversion of the narrator's authority within the text takes place as Maisie creeps ever closer to the threshold of adolescence. This fact has led most critics to assume that "the point at which the narrator begins to set himself distinctly apart from Maisie is the point at which Maisie is beginning to make real sense of her world... at the end [of the novel] his presence is effaced as if to grant her the autonomy that the growth of the individual she represents requires" (Wolk 202-3).

Yet just because the narrator's relationship with Maisie seems to indicate development does not necessarily mean that this is what we see in Maisie herself. We are given greater access to what we can only presume is her own experience from this point on, it is true, and this access does suggest a more mature and aware engagement with her surroundings than we have previously been presented with. However, this may reflect the decreasing mediation on the part of the narrator more than any personal growth in Maisie. What we are glimpsing towards the novel's end is a clearer picture of Maisie herself, one which we have had to piece together from gaps or clues in the narrative translation which insisted on presenting her according to adult expectations of childhood. The text draws attention to the presence of the narrator as a distinct subject whose interpretation of Maisie – which we as readers have had to rely on – is now suspect, entreating us to call that interpretation into question, not only "from this time forward", but from Maisie's first introduction.

The assurance that what is related is "from this time forward a picture literally present to her" is left uncomfortably vague: are we to believe that it is only from this time forward that the narrator will struggle to comprehend the inner thoughts of the titular character? What does this suggest about the narrator's translation of Maisie's supposed thoughts and opinions in the pages that follow? The statement also carries with it the possibility that the depictions offered previously

cannot be trusted by the reader as “a picture literally present” to Maisie. In either case, this narrative crisis indicates an evolution within the narrative voice as it presents the young heroine, mirroring that of her parents and step-parents; over time both the narrator and Maisie’s guardians come to see her differently. The narrator’s personal confession, of his failure to adequately narrate the enigmatic mind of the child is followed by the rumination, presumably Maisie’s that,

If her whole history, for Mrs Wix, had been the successive stages of her knowledge, so the very climax of the concatenation would, in the same view, be the stage at which the knowledge should over flow. As she was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? It came to her in fact as they sat there on the sands that she was distinctly on the road to know Everything. She had not had governesses for nothing: what in the world had she ever done but learn and learn and learn? She looked at the pink sky with a placid foreboding that she soon should have learnt All. (James, *Maisie* 169)

In the light of the revelation that the narrator is not, in the case of Maisie at least, omniscient, this reflection stands less as the musing of a young girl on the nature of her educational progress than as the narrator’s own terrified realisation of Maisie’s unfathomable consciousness. The capacity for such knowledge is not necessarily one that Maisie herself possesses, but one which is given to her by the text, specifically by the narrator. The foreboding prediction that “she soon should have learnt All” is the cry of the adult in sudden confrontation with a consciousness that it had not previously reckoned with, and which it has no way of knowing itself. It is also the key to understanding Maisie’s monstrosity.

In “The Middle Way of Miss Farange: A Study of James’ *Maisie*”, Hynes raises and dismisses the possibility of Maisie’s monstrosity, stating that “one reason for our possibly being tempted to think (wrongly) of Maisie as monstrous is that she deliberately feigns stupidity [which] could be thought of as cloaking the unnatural... only if Maisie did in fact ‘know’ what she is learning; only if Maisie knew what the reader knows of the behavior and motives circulating around her. As things are,

Maisie simply does not know” (547). This dismissal is perhaps a bit too hasty, in that it overlooks the qualities of Maisie’s awareness – what Maisie knows about her own position in relation to the adults around her is far more important than her comprehension of specific facts; more to the point, “what the reader knows of the behavior and motives circulating around her” is itself not a concrete measure by which to determine Maisie’s knowledge. Even more crucially, however, the condescension with which Hynes denies the possibility that Maisie herself might be monstrous indicates a misreading of the nature of her monstrosity, or of the idea of monstrosity itself. The association that Hynes draws between monstrosity and unnatural qualities makes this clear. The monstrous is not that which is unnatural; it is that which is so uncomfortably a natural part of ourselves that we feel compelled to reject it as entirely “other”. Maisie’s monstrosity is revealed not in the ways in which she is contrary to the “normal”, “natural” child, but in the ways in which she embodies the most terrifying elements, the most unnerving potential, of all children, those qualities which we as adults find so disturbing that we have to exclude them from our normative constructions of childhood and children.

Maisie as a monstrous child is a completely different entity from the most classic of James’ uncanny children, Miles and Flora from *The Turn of the Screw*. As Robert Pattison points out, “whether Miles and Flora are literally little monsters - ‘deformed, unhealthy, unnatural’ - will depend on how the story is analyzed” (93).³⁷ Miles and Flora’s monstrosity is dependent upon their close relationship to the text: they are caught up in a scenario which is itself wholly monstrous – whether due to the governess’s madness or supernatural circumstances – and they play a key role in its construction as such. Maisie’s monstrosity, on the other hand, does not rely on

³⁷ Pattison outlines an association between the monstrous, the deformed, the unhealthy (each of them inherently a natural phenomenon) and the unnatural which raises questions about the construction of Miles and Flora’s own monstrosity; unfortunately these questions cannot be explored adequately in these pages.

monstrous circumstances, but on her distance from her situation, not only in terms of the narrator's alienating "mediation", but also Maisie's own dissociation from the world around her. Maisie knows All, is aware of Everything, but is herself touched by nothing; as Shine points out,

In spite of James's carefully delineated record of Maisie's reactions to her experiences, there is an essential element missing in his projection of her; this omission furthers the development of the author's theme but it robs Maisie of psychological authenticity. Despite the brutality to which the child is exposed, she is completely devoid of anger or resentment... While James exhibits psychological discernment in his rendering of Maisie's perception of the world, he fails to face the implications of those perceptions for the child. In Maisie, James has created what was perhaps for him the ideal child, one who is victimized and aware, yet free from aggression and hostility. (124-5)

Shine's suggests that "because Maisie bears no grudges, her moral sense is free to develop to its fullest capacity" (124). Yet, as we have seen, the novel presents no concrete evidence that Maisie ever does develop a moral sense to any capacity. More importantly, Shine suggests that Maisie, as James' "ideal child", is one "who could, one suspects, only exist in the world of James's rich and creative imagination" (125); however, in the construction of Maisie as a monstrous child figure, the novel specifically denies the possibility that it is defined to the girl alone.

When Mrs Wix puts it to Maisie that the child understands, but does not condemn, the situation between Sir Claude and Mrs Beale, her accusation points to the curious lack of the kind of response we might expect from a child, either in terms of moral condemnation or of hostile aggression provoked by her repeated abandonment and neglect at the hands of her parents and step-parents. What Shine calls the "prevailing sentimentality" which characterised "the cult of the child" (22) imposes on adult constructions of childhood a degree of innocence and emotional sensitivity which Maisie entirely lacks, along with the heightened moral aptitude traditionally displayed by nineteenth-century literary child figures. Yet Maisie's

almost sociopathic engagement with the world around her is *not* confined to the world of James' imagination, contrary to Shine's suggestion. Maisie stands as a warning to adult readers about the friability of their constructions of children and childhood. She has achieved total awareness not only of her domestic situation, but her own "critical edge", the fact that, "out of the spotlight, [she] can be unseen, subversively hiding in the cloak of unrecognized otherness" (Honeyman 27). Not only does she manipulate this awareness to her own "entertainment", but the destructive events which take place, the harmful disinterest of her parents, fail to elicit from her the kind of "genuine" emotional response which traditional constructions of childhood might suggest. Further to this, she is not a unique example: Maisie's performance as "child" is not in opposition to a "healthy", normative childhood.

Consider again the lines with which Maisie is introduced: "It was to be the fate of this child to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before" (James, *Maisie* 15). The extent of Maisie's understanding, which is described only as "much more than any little girl", is, of course, the great mystery of the novel. Just what constitutes "much more" than any other little girl, or indeed, little boy – with the intriguing exception of little drummer boys in battle – is not clarified here, nor anywhere else in the text. Maisie does, in some ways, "understand much more than any little girl" before her; yet it is not in her self-aware construction of a performed child-identity that Maisie stands apart from other children.

Shuttleworth, in her discussion of Maisie's performance of childhood, places this element of the novel in the context of nineteenth-century child study, in which "members of the child study movement often expressed concerns that children, from too much questioning, might become too self-conscious, and hence not natural"

(325). James, Shuttleworth suggests,

Paints a scenario where the category of ‘natural’ is a fond delusion, where a child is constantly subject to observation and spends her life trying to anticipate what form of response or behaviour is desired, or indeed required... At a time when fiction for children was increasingly focusing on a world where children could exist in a realm of their own imagination, free from adult restraint, James suggests through his novel that children are utterly defined by the adults who frame their lives. (325-6)

It should be pointed out that Shuttleworth’s notion that “children are utterly defined by the adults who frame their lives” ties back to her assertion that Maisie’s performance dooms her to passivity. However, while Shuttleworth speaks of framing as that which encloses and limits, the framing of Maisie’s childhood pantomime, read in light of her agency and self-awareness, constitutes more of a shaping influence than an enclosure. Maisie’s performed childhood may have been constructed and adapted in response to parental expectations, but it still stems from her unique agency. What Shuttleworth does make clear here, though, is the fact that although Maisie may find herself confronted with forms of knowledge from which most children are, it is assumed, kept innocent, in her self-aware construction of a performance she is not unique.

Maisie makes the process of a child’s construction of its identity *as* child to become visible; it is a process which is connected to uncanny images of animated dolls and automata, and through them to anxieties about the monstrous potentiality of the child figure itself. Yet Maisie as monstrous child is not evil; she does not belong to the race of terrifying children which are so often the subject of modern horror films, the type of children which James himself alludes to in “The Turn of the Screw”. She is part of a tradition of monstrosity which is far more complex than such “good v. evil” narratives. Her monstrosity is founded on the child’s mind as an impenetrable gap, a conceptual lack which we as adults can never know, yet which we refuse to admit in our visions of the child. In *What Maisie Knew*, childhood is a

state which is not only unknowable from an external, adult perspective, but which is self-aware, conscious of its own incomprehensibility, and capable of manipulating adult expectations of children. In this sense, Maisie represents a universally monstrous child, or at least the inherent potential which all children have to become monstrous. She embodies a construction of childishness which elicits discomfort, anxiety, which must be re-read and re-interpreted because it is, to adults, monstrous.

The narrator would have us believe that “[Maisie’s] little world was phantasmagoric – strange shadows dancing on a sheet” (James, *Maisie* 15), but in truth that description could more accurately be applied to the world of the novel itself. As a character, Maisie stands still as the filters through which she is presented revolve around her, and we as readers are invited to see the resulting “strange shadows dancing on a sheet”. The performance of the text obscures Maisie’s consciousness, her self-awareness, and her manipulation as qualities which have not developed over the course of the novel, but which she has had – unbeknownst to her guardians, the narrator, or an undiscerning reader – from its opening pages. Worse, still, the monstrosity of this child is that of every child, forged of the same materials that underwrite the horror of a living doll, made even more terrible by the unsettling reality of the child mind.

Yet as much as Maisie’s monstrosity is constructed as an inherent possibility of childhood, there is one respect in which she is unique: her performed child-self does not die – it does not transition into adolescence or adulthood. In her refusal to step outside of child role which has offered her some element of power and agency in circumstances which would otherwise see her doomed to the very passivity of which James warns, Maisie becomes, like Diamond, like the Lovers, like Sister Benvenuta, and Emerald Uthwart, the embodiment of an un-dead child. She is the child that refuses to die, which insists upon remaining static within a narrative of

development. Perhaps, then – hearkening back to the origins of the term itself – Maisie is a portent, a warning of the dangers which lie in denying children self-awareness. Child figures as they are constructed by Lee, Pater, and MacDonald, entwined with the desire for immortality and left in states of non-death as if it were a natural element of childhood, are here exposed as no less unnatural than Maisie, with her unnerving performance of childhood. Although they are not accorded the sense of awareness in which Maisie’s monstrosity is founded, they are similarly constructed as child figures that reject the natural process of death. The idealised childhood in which Pater, Lee, and MacDonald base their disruptions of death is precisely the vision of childhood which, as *Maisie* reveals, denies the child any measure of self-awareness. The disturbing images that haunt Pater’s, Lee’s, and MacDonald’s child figures – images that the authors seek to divest of any horror – are an indication of these authors’ construction of the un-dead child: it, too, is stripped of any monstrosity.

Monstrosity, as a physical construct, is defined by the dissolution of normative boundaries by a forced inclusion of what is deemed to be “unnatural” within the concept of what is “natural”; one of the best examples of the way in which *Maisie* does just this with conceptions of childhood is its engagement with ideas of child’s play. The typical trappings and models of child’s play are absent from *What Maisie Knew* – toys and magic lanterns are tossed into obscurity after brief mention (17, 15) as is the case with Maisie’s dolls. However, the spirit of child’s play pervades Maisie’s actions; as we have already seen, she conceives of events, situations, and relationships in terms of game-play with herself as active participant, and this explains, too, the fact that her self-aware performance and manipulation are not necessarily evidence of moral corruption. Maisie manipulates simply to see what will happen, engaging with those around her as one might expect a child to interact

with dolls. Hers is the spirit with which most children approach games, as Robert Louis Stevenson suggests in "Child's Play": "Hide-and-seek has so pre-eminent a sovereignty [with children], for it is the wellspring of romance, and the actions and the excitement to which it gives rise lend themselves to almost any sort of fable" (238-9). By constructing Maisie's monstrosity according to a definitive and "natural" characteristic of childhood, the novel betrays the monstrosity inherent in conceptions of childhood that seek to imbue the child with otherworldly powers of innocence, immediacy, and purity in order to revoke the finitude of death itself.

Conclusion

In reflecting back upon the role of child's play in James' construction of a monstrous childhood, we are reminded not only of its central importance to Dickens, Stevenson, and many others, but also of its strange absence, or even stranger presence, in each of the texts discussed in this study. James' somewhat distorted engagement with the child's natural playfulness in *What Maisie Knew* has already been briefly considered; interestingly, although any descriptions of play are absent from Pater's "The Child in the House", the text's descriptions of childhood's impressions describe

Our susceptibilities, the discovery of our powers, manifold experiences – our various experiences of the coming and going of bodily pain, for instance – belong to this or the other well-remembered place in the material habitation... a system of visible symbolism interweaves itself through all our thoughts and passions; and irresistibly, little shapes, voices, accidents – the angle at which the sun in the morning fell on the pillow – become parts of the great chain wherewith we are bound. (152)

Pater's description of childhood experiences carries with it an echo of Stevenson's recollection of the child's sensory engagement with the world, and the significance of "pleasurable sensations" and "overmastering pain – the most deadly and tragical element in life" (224-5). However, the similarity is in language only; while Stevenson describes an intensification in sensory experience that is achieved at the cost of the child's sense of wonder, Pater describes the superiority of the child's senses, and of the impressions that they have on its perception of "the great chain wherewith we are bound".

The two descriptions seem to be inverted: Stevenson's description of adults who "know more that when they were children... understand better, [and whose] desires and sympathies answer more nimbly to the provocation of the senses" (227) contrasts with Pater's description of childhood in which, in response to sensory impressions, "a system of visible symbolism interweaves itself through all our thoughts and passions". The point on which this difference in perspective hinges is play: play justifies Stevenson's description of child's relatively dulled sense of perception. He describes how "some remarkable circumstance, such as a water-cart or a guardsman, fairly penetrates into the seat of thought and calls the, for half a moment, out of themselves... it may be some minutes before another such moving spectacle reawakens them to the world in which they dwell" (227-8). For Stevenson, this intense "perpetual imagination" forms the foundation for the child's world of play; for Pater, who imagines no such distracting reliance on fancy, the child's existence becomes centred on the aesthetic impressions of the world around it.

Lee similarly constructs a child world that is defined by the development of an aesthetic sensibility, and which is founded upon its unique perception of an aesthetic Ideal. Stevenson's description of childhood refers to a quality which seems, superficially, reminiscent of Lee's Ideal. His recollection that "the things I call to

mind seeing most vividly, were not beautiful in themselves, but merely interesting or enviable to me” (224) calls to mind Lee’s memory of the Christmas reindeer rendered beautiful in the child’s eyes. However, once again this similarity is one of expression only: Stevenson relates such vivid perception to children’s tendency to “use their eyes for the pleasure of using them, but for by-ends of their own,” specifically to seek out those things which “might be turned to practical account in play (224). Lee’s Ideal, on the other hand, is tied to what she sees as the child’s inherent aestheticism. Dolls – the child’s plaything and perhaps the most iconic symbol of child’s play – abound in Lee’s essays, and yet do not figure as an object of play. It is invested instead with an aesthetic Ideal by the child. Although the puppets which give Sister Benvenuta such pleasure do so in the form of entertainment, and theatricality, which might be read as a form of play, Stevenson rejects the theatre as a means of recapturing the playful child’s spirit. Although he emphasises the importance of acting out parts to the child’s experience of play, he also suggests that “the true parallel for play is not to be found, of course, in conscious art, which, though it be derived from play, is itself an abstract, impersonal thing” (234). Once again, where Lee touches upon an aspect of childhood, such as the prop central to child’s play the puppets, dolls, and toys, they become divorced from the experience of child’s play itself, even when they are explored in relation to a child figure.

MacDonald’s texts seem to more explicitly evoke child’s play as Stevenson depicts it, and yet MacDonald’s fantasy worlds, defined in relation to the child, are not characterised by child’s play itself. Stevenson’s description of the fantastic world which the child inhabits and physically experiences as he “skirmish[es] by the hour with a stationary coal-scuttle” (230) is in some ways akin to MacDonald’s own fantasy realms. In each a separate space, characterised by properties unique to the child, is outlined. Vane’s encompassing and physical experience of the fantastic

world of *Lilith*, and Diamond's complete removal into a fantastic realm in *At the Back of the North Wind*, are similar to the child's existence within a world of play, its ability to "make abstraction of whatever does not fit into his fable" (Stevenson 230). But although MacDonald's fantastic child-realms may be constructed along similar lines to Stevenson's world of child's play, they lack the spirit of play in any traditional sense. Even the general mirth of the Lovers in *Lilith*, and their friendship with animals, are cast in a sombre light: their laughter, though an innate quality of their child-like characters, is divorced from the kind of imaginative romances or games which Stevenson places at the heart of the child's experience of the world. Their kinship with animals, which is described as founded in "loving, playful approaches" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 158), is depicted as an almost political alliance – the Lovers "set themselves to secure [the animals'] aid against the giants" (158) – and quickly turns martial as the children ride the animals to make war on Bulika.

In each instance, the concept of child's play in its entirety, what we might call the playful spirit of such features, is absent. In *What Maisie Knew*, the very spirit of play is itself warped. The notion that "in the child's world of dim sensation, play is all in all" (235) provides a framework for James' exploration of the child's awareness not only of itself as a child, but of its relative invisibility within the adult world. The result is a child who plays with the unknowing adults around her no differently than children engage with the dolls, toys, and other "lay figures and stage properties" (229) which Stevenson notes are essential to the tangible experience of play.

Although James twists child's play rather than abandoning it like Lee, Pater, and MacDonald, his child figure similarly does not engage with play in the traditional sense. I stated in the introduction that it could be argued that all Maisie does is play, but in the context of Stevenson's concept of the phenomenon of child's play this is perhaps not entirely accurate. It is true that Maisie has a more playful spirit, as

Stevenson describes it, than any of the child figures which Lee, Pater, or MacDonald produce, and that she is playful in her construction of a performance of childhood, yet she does not herself *play* in any traditional sense. Maisie can be said to play more than Pater's, Lee's, or MacDonald's child figures, yet once again, she retains only elements of child's play which are appropriated and transformed to serve some other purpose.

That each of the child figures in these texts demonstrates no indication of the essential characteristic of child's play, or else perverts it, raises intriguing questions about their construction of a unique engagement between the child and death. For Dickens, the absence of a natural culture of childhood, with play at its very core, lead inevitably to the production of deformed adults; for Stevenson child's play is the very world of the child. Yet in these texts the absence or perversion of child's play never meets with negative consequences, and it is never commented on. Even *Maisie*, although it may not necessarily conclude on a particularly positive note, does not explicitly punish its heroine for her monstrous childhood; she is able, in the end, to retain the position of child. While Dickens and Stevenson looked upon the absence of play as the absence of childhood itself, for Pater, Lee, MacDonald, and James such an absence, or, more strangely still, transformation of play, was evidently so natural that it had no consequences at all. The one major exception is both discomfiting and revealing. For perhaps it is no coincidence that Lee, in the essay "Limbo", depicts the site of child's play at the Rabbits' Villa as the graveyard of children who have passed into adulthood. For Lee, the "superannuated toy[s]" (4) which lie abandoned, the discarded remains of childhood, are the ghosts of children trapped in "the small Limbos of this kind" (5).

Child's play is haunted by death in this deeply disturbing image, an image which also carries with it the prospect that it must always and inevitably be so. For

the death which permeates the Rabbits' Villa is not the physical death of the individual but the death of childhood, that to which Maisie, in all her monstrosity, refuses to submit. Yet the very fact that Maisie's refusal to die out of childhood and into adulthood is an intrinsic part of her monstrosity only further underlines the inevitability of that developmental mortality. All remnants of child's play must at some point pass into the ghosts of the children who once played with them. From her macabre reconsideration of child's playthings, Lee progresses to a discussion of "might-have-been", of lost potentiality which – in a strain of thought which ought not to be familiar now – is not truly lost in some finitude of death, but lives on in "Limbo, the Kingdom of Might-have-been" (18). Her reconstruction of death is thus echoed in a reconsideration of child's play, raising the question of how the other texts' strange engagement with play might relate not only to their child figures, but also to their attempts to mediate the finite nature of mortality.

It is a question which certainly begs for more intensive analysis. Given the fervour with which authors such as Dickens and Stevenson whose literary children or literature for children have become so canonical, argued for the centrality of child's play to the experience of childhood itself, those representations of children in literature from which play is absent, or else is recognisably different from what we might expect, are surely significant. That four authors whose construction of childhood and child figures features a marked absence or distortion of child's play should also place those child figures at the centre of an attempt to reconfigure the nature of death is likewise intriguing. It indicates that, beyond the assumed truths underlying discussions of nineteenth-century literary representations of children and death, there remains an abundance of critical potential. While there are authors who unite the child and death under the banner of an implicit failure of potential, a crisis of faith, or a desperate desire to preserve fleeting innocence permanently, there are

also those who see in the connection between the child and death the power to transform death itself. For Pater, Lee, and MacDonald, the child possessed a unique power to bind death and life indefinitely and disrupt that finite experience. James, on the other hand, saw the power accorded the child figure, and sought to expose the monstrosity within it.

Stevenson concludes "Child's Play" with a request that parents spare their children, "let them doze among their playthings yet a little!" (244). It would, he says, "be easy to leave them in their native cloudland, where they figure so prettily – pretty like flowers and innocent like dogs" (243-4). The phrase "they figure so prettily" seems to epitomise the prevalence and impact of the child in literature. Although Stevenson uses the word "figure" in terms of the child's natural placement in their sphere, we cannot help but read it in relation to ideas of expression, of representation, of portrayal: children in their cloudlands, in their separate realms to which we are denied access, whether they be playful or monstrous or fantastic in nature, figure so prettily. Is this is not the power of the child figure in literature, which makes it so well-suited to act as a catalyst for a reconstruction of something as concrete and yet abstract as death? Perhaps James', Lee's, Pater's, and MacDonald's literary children are able to transform, or mediate, or reject mortality because they "figure so prettily".

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