

## WHAT MAISIE KNEW: TRANSLATING JAMES'S LATE STYLE\*

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In “The Art of Fiction” (1884), an essay written a few years before his ill-fated attempt to start a new career as a playwright, Henry James wrote that the novelist, like the historian, seeks truth — the truth that follows the premises he assumes — and that “the air of reality ... seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel” (James 1984: 53). Thirteen years later, having given up writing for the stage, James published *What Maisie Knew* (James 1991, henceforward abbreviated *WMK*), a work that stands on the threshold of his so-called late style — a style that has stricken so many readers and critics as impenetrable, manneristic, and downright exasperating. Henry James’s development from a more or less conventional mode of storytelling to an idiosyncratic style that seems to highlight the text itself and push character and plot off to the background may seem to be at odds with a statement of principle that defines the novel as a representation of life and stresses the importance of the mimetic effect. But I believe we can understand whatever seems puzzling about James’s late style if we keep in mind that there is no contradiction between his theoretical speculations and his actual practice as a fictionist. James, I think, would be quite shocked should he come back to life in the midst of a typical contemporary seminar on literature and fictionality, dominated by the prevailing late-20th-century view that literature is, and can only be, about itself; and would be horrified to find that he is typically seen in our times as the preeminent example of a writer for whom “textuality” is all.

The story behind the development of James’s late style is well known: after a string of stories and novels contrasting the differences and clashes between American and European mores, he turned to studies of political radicalism in England and the U.S. — *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Bostonians* — and then decided to write for the theater, with results that were disastrous from both the artistic and the commercial viewpoints. Having failed as a dramatist, James returned to fiction, but his writing had changed forever. The changes, which were already clearly manifested in *WMK* and were to become more and more prominent with each succeeding work, may be reduced, for our present purposes, to two basic features. The first is strict adherence to one or several angles of vision, limiting the reader’s knowledge to what can be seen from there; the second is the use of ever more complex syntactic structures in an apparent attempt to reproduce in detail intricate minutiae of the processes of subjective experience. But before we illustrate these characteristics with examples from *WMK*, perhaps a brief summary of the plot is in order here, for the sake of those who have not read the book.

Maisie is the young daughter of a rich and fashionable couple who separate in the most acrimonious terms. The two parents, who are veritable monsters of selfishness and mutual loathing, are to have custody of the child for successive six-month terms. In the course of the novel they remarry and are gradually relegated to the background, for Maisie’s stepfather and stepmother meet and fall in love, and Maisie’s loyalties are divided between, on the one hand, the illicit couple, both of whom she loves dearly, and, on the other, Mrs. Wix, a governess who is the embodiment of middle-class morals and

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whose overriding concern for the development of Maisie's moral sense is perhaps the major theme of the novel.

This, of course, gives only the barest bones of the plot, but it will have to do. Let us turn now to the two innovative features of James's late style and see how they appear in *WMK*. The first characteristic — unity of viewpoint — is clearly stated out in James's preface to the New York Edition of the novel:

I recall 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. Further reflexion and experiment showed me my subject strangled in that extreme of rigour. The infant mind would at the best leave great gaps and voids; so that with a systematic surface possibly beyond reproach we should nevertheless fail of clearness of sense. I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness materially and inevitably saw; a great deal of which quantity she either would n't understand at all or would quite misunderstand — and on those lines, only on those, my task would be prettily cut out. To that then I settled — to the quest of giving it *all*, the whole situation surrounding her, but of giving it only through the occasions and connexions of her proximity and her attention; only as it might pass before her and appeal to her, as it might touch her and affect her, for better or worse, for perceptive gain or perceptive loss ... .  
(*WMK* 5-6)

This passage (which, incidentally, is itself a good example of James's late style) shows that James came to the brink of a major breakthrough in the history of the novel but failed to take the step that would have made him anticipate the technique of the first chapter of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist of a Young Man*. James actually envisaged the possibility of restricting himself, for the sake of completeness and coherency, strictly to what an immature character could have access to; but his commitment to "clearness of sense" and his abhorrence of "gaps and voids" led him to a compromise: he would settle for "giving it *all*," but only at those moments when Maisie was present. So that there is no scene in the novel when the child is not onstage; however, the narrator's voice is not Maisie's but rather that of an adult who is determined to show us how the situation looks from Maisie's vantage-point.

The second major feature that distinguishes James's later prose is the one that will concern us mostly here: the long, complex sentences with their convoluted structure. For this he was widely accused at the time (and still is, in fact) of oversubtlety; H. G. Wells, for one, famously compared him to a "leviathan retrieving pebbles." From what we know of James's intentions in his fiction — and we know much, for he wrote copiously about them — we can safely say that nothing could be further from his mind than the idea of making the texture of his prose its own object. Again and again he insists: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (James 1984: 46). Of course, we are free to read James the fictionist against the protests of James the critic — an exercise that might well lead to interesting conclusions. But if we take James's word for it and look at his late novels in the light of his essays, as I intend to do here, we are bound to conclude that there must be a functional reason for this complexity,

for these interminable sentences with subordinate clauses that go into one another like so many Russian dolls; in some way, then, it all must have to do with an “attempt to represent life.” But how?

Before I advance my tentative hypothesis, I would like to stress that I am by no means a James scholar, but rather an enthusiastic reader of James’s work who happens to have translated one novel and a handful of stories by him. I do not claim originality for my little theory; should it turn out to be an idea that has been put forward before in one of the countless papers and books on James published over the last few decades — very few of which, admittedly, I have read — so much the worse for my idea, or for me. And if someone were to come up with a number of counterexamples that proved my idea absurd, I would be only too glad to relegate it to the ash-heap of history. My only intention here is to propose one way of reading the peculiarities of James’s late style in the light of some of the positions he consistently stresses in his critical writings, and to use it to justify my decision to attempt to reproduce his syntax in Portuguese.

So here it goes. I believe that in James, as in Proust, syntactic complexity is always at the service of intellectual complexity: there is an isomorphism between the elaborateness of the sentence structure and the elusiveness of the meaning the sentence is intended to convey. I also feel that one of the major themes in James’s later work is precisely the intrusion of uncomfortable and unmentionable facts in people’s lives, and what they do in order to avoid facing these facts head on. So the roundaboutness of the sentences and the paragraphs may be seen as formal equivalents of the feats of moral contortionism that the characters are forced to undergo in order to avoid facing such unpleasant realities. And of these realities, of course, sex is one of the most important. Indeed, James himself points the way to this conclusion in his critical writings, particularly in the texts where he contrasts the English novel and the French. There are a number of passages in which he criticizes British and American novels for excessive prudishness, in contrast with the work of the French. Thus in “The Future of the Novel” James observes that at the time — the time of Richardson and Fielding — when “society was free about the incidents and accidents of the human constitution, the novel took the same robust ease as society” (James 1984: 107), but ever since women and young people became the primary public of novels “there came into being a mistrust of any but the most guarded treatment of the great relation between men and women” (p. 107). However, in “The Literary Situation in France” James again praises the French for the maturity of their outlook, but in the same breath criticizes them for the “sameness of subject: — *the* subject, so familiar to us all that this light emphasis suffices to identify it” (p. 120). Passion, James argues, “lives a great variety of life, burns with other flames and throbs with other obsessions than the sole sexual” (p. 121). In short: James seems wholly conscious that the absence of sex gives the English novel a certain infantile character, but feels the emphasis on sex makes French fiction “unclean” — a term he uses in this connection in a passage I can’t seem to locate right now. That James’s relation to sex is marked by ambivalence is quite obvious even to one who is unaware of the fact that he was a homosexual living in Victorian England.

So my hypothesis is that, as James was increasingly concerned with making his novels more “adult,” treating such subjects as, say, homosexual child abuse, real or imagined (as in “The Turn of the Screw”), subjects that are horrifying to the characters involved, not to mention the public and the author himself, his syntax became more and

more tortuous, as if the characters' and the narrators' minds were having a hard time coming to grips with the reality they were dealing with. Such would be the case of *WMK*, a novel which, though mostly light-hearted in tone, involves divorce, irresponsible parenting, sexual promiscuity and adultery — all seen through the eyes of a little girl, the very symbol of purity and innocence in the society James lived in.

Now, if this is true, then James's syntactic complexity, even his occasional awkwardness, must be preserved in any translation that intends to do justice to the original. This is precisely what I have attempted to do in *Pelos olhos de Maisie* (James 1994, henceforward abbreviated as *POM*). However, as we will see, the results were not as consistent with my intentions as I would have wished.

Most of the syntactic complexity in *WMK* boils down to two basic features: inordinate length of the sentence and an abundance of interpolated constituents that break up the structure of the sentence into a large number of relatively short segments. These two features are variously combined and put to a number of different uses, examples of which I will now turn to.

Here is a relatively simple example of a structure with multiple interpolation, from the beginning of the book:

The father, who, though bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance of this triumph, appointed to keep her.... (*WMK* 11)

This was translated as follows:

O pai, o qual, embora respingado de lama da cabeça aos pés, havia conseguido se impor, conquistou, em consequência desta vitória, o direito de ficar com ela [...]. (*POM* 9)

Here is a somewhat more complex example:

Preoccupied, however, as Maisie was with the idea of the sentiment Sir Claude had inspired, and familiar, in addition, by Mrs. Wix's anecdotes, with the ravages that in general such a sentiment could produce, she was able to make allowances for her ladyship's remarkable appearance, her violent splendour, the wonderful colour of her lips and even the hard stare, the stare of some gorgeous idol described in a story-book, that had come into her eyes in consequence of a curious thickening of their already rich circumference. (*WMK* 57-8)

Tendo em mente, no entanto, a idéia do sentimento que teria sido despertado por sir Claude, e cônica, graças às narrativas da senhora Wix, dos estragos que tal sentimento é capaz de produzir, Maisie pôde aceitar a extraordinária aparência de sua mãe, seu violento esplendor, a cor surpreendente de seus lábios, até mesmo o olhar duro e fixo semelhante ao de um ídolo vistoso descrito em algum livro de aventuras, que surgira em seus olhos como consequência de um curioso aumento de sua circunferência, normalmente já pronunciada. (*POM* 63)

In this passage, we are given first Maisie's rationalizations — mother is in love with Sir Claude, and love explains and justifies any sort of behavior, however bizarre — before we are confronted with Ida's appearance, which clearly shocked Maisie; again, the convoluted syntax mimics the psychological process by means of which the child girded herself up before facing the somewhat frightening figure of her mother.

In other cases, this device is clearly used to achieve suspense, as the interpolated syntactic constituent delays closure of the main clause. Here is an example of what we might call “syntactic suspense”:

The little lady already engaged there to come by the hour, a fat dark little lady with a foreign name and dirty fingers, who wore, throughout, a bonnet that had at first given her a deceptive air, too soon dispelled, of not staying long, besides asking her pupil questions that had nothing to do with lessons, questions that Beale Farange himself, when two or three were repeated to him, admitted to be awfully low — this strange apparition faded before the bright creature who had braved everything for Maisie's sake. (*WMK* 24)

The sentence quoted above comes immediately after we are told that the “bright creature” mentioned in the end — Maisie's adored governess — kept her promise not to abandon Maisie, so that from the very beginning of the sentence we know that “the little lady,” an alternative governess, is doomed to irrelevance. However, the narrator postpones the actual information that “the little lady” was dismissed, thus creating in the mind of the reader a mixture of anticipation and irritation that closely resembles the feelings that would have been experienced by a child in such a situation.

Here is my translated version:

A pessoa que já havia sido contratada para trabalhar como horista, uma senhora morena, gorda, baixa, de nome estrangeiro e dedos sujos, que não tirava da cabeça uma touca que de início emprestara-lhe um ar de permanência que logo revelou-se falso, além de dirigir à menina perguntas que nada tinham a ver com os estudos, perguntas que o próprio Beale Farange, quando duas ou três lhe foram repetidas, admitiu serem muito vulgares — esta estranha aparição esvaeceu-se diante daquela refulgente criatura que tanto ousara por amor a Maisie. (*POM* 25)

Perhaps the first criticism that this translation will elicit is that it contains an excess of *ques* — seven in all, three of them in clauses each of which is subordinated to the previous one. This particular sort of ugliness will often occur when one attempts to render James's syntax faithfully, since *que* tends to be used to translate structures in cases corresponding to uses of “that”, “which”, “who” and adjective phrases with participles as heads (as “already engaged there to come by the hour” in the example above). Of course, I could (and should) have avoided this accumulation of *ques* — for instance, by using *a qual* in one or two instances, as in fact I did in my first example above.

Here is another fine instance of suspense. When the time comes for Maisie to move from her father's house to her mother's, her father gives her a message she is to relay to her mother — a message that, to tell from the reaction of the child's nurse, surely contains something awful. Maisie is then taken to her mother, who wants to know

whether her “beastly papa” has sent any message to her. The chopped-up syntax here has the effect of delaying the punch line of the episode (and of the entire chapter):

Then it was that she found the words spoken by her beastly papa to be, after all, in her little bewildered ears, from which, at her mother’s appeal, they passed, in her clear shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips. “He said I was to tell you, from him,” she faithfully reported, “that you ’re a nasty horrid pig!” (*WMK* 18)

Só então ela constatou que as palavras pronunciadas pelo biltre do seu pai tinham, afinal, entrado em seus ouvidos atônitos, de onde, atendendo ao pedido da mãe, elas passaram direto para seus lábios cândidos, de onde saíram numa voz límpida e estridente: “Ele pediu para eu dizer”, repetiu ela, direitinho, “que a senhora é uma grandessíssima vaca!”. (*POM* 18)

Again, there are a few questionable solutions in this translation — most obviously, the unnecessary repetition of “de onde” — but the syntactic tension has been preserved. The need to change a pig into a cow will be, I think, appreciated by everyone here who is aware of the symbolic meanings of these two animals in the Brazilian mind.

To conclude, let us look at a somewhat longer passage. Maisie has just come from a dreadful evening with her father and his new lover, the Countess, who has given Maisie an inordinate sum so she can take a cab and go home right away.

The money was far too much even for a fee in a fairy-tale, and in the absence of Mrs. Beale, who, though the hour was now late, had not yet returned to the Regent’s Park, Susan Ash, in the hall, as loud as Maisie was low and as bold as she was bland, produced, on the exhibition offered under the dim vigil of the lamp that made the place a contrast to the child’s recent scene of light, the half-crown that an unsophisticated cabman could pronounce to be the least he would take. It was apparently long before Mrs. Beale would arrive, and in the interval Maisie had been induced by the prompt Susan not only to go to bed like a darling dear, but, in still richer expression of that character, to devote to the repayment of obligations general as well as particular one of the sovereigns in the ordered array that, on the dressing-table upstairs, was naturally not less dazzling to a lone orphan of a housemaid than to the subject of the manœuvres of a quartette. This subject went to sleep with her property gathered into a knotted handkerchief, the largest that could be produced and lodged under her pillow; but the explanations that on the morrow were inevitably more complete with Mrs. Beale than they had been with her humble friend found their climax in a surrender also more becomingly free. There were explanations indeed that Mrs. Beale had to give as well as to ask, and the most striking of these was to the effect that it was dreadful for a little girl to take money from a woman who was simply the vilest of their sex. The sovereigns were examined with some attention, the result of which, however, was to make the author of that statement desire to know what, if one really went into the matter, they could be called but the wages of sin. Her companion went into it merely so far as the question of what then they were to do with them; on which Mrs. Beale, who had by this time put them into her pocket, replied with dignity and with

her hand on the place: “We ’re to send them back on the spot!” Susan, the child soon afterwards learnt, had been invited to contribute to this act of restitution her one appropriated coin; but a closer clutch of the treasure showed in her private assurance to Maisie that there was a limit to the way she could be “done.” Maisie had been open with Mrs. Beale about the whole of last night’s transaction; but she now found herself on the part of their indignant inferior a recipient of remarks that were so many ringing tokens of that lady’s own suppressions. One of these bore upon the extraordinary hour — it was three in the morning if she really wanted to know — at which Mrs. Beale had re-entered the house; another, in accents as to which Maisie’s criticism was still intensely tacit, characterised her appeal as such a “gime,” such a “shime,” as one had never had to put up with; a third treated with some vigour the question of the enormous sums due belowstairs, in every department, for gratuitous labour and wasted zeal. Our young lady’s consciousness was indeed mainly filled for several days with the apprehension created by the too slow subsidence of her attendant’s sense of wrong. These days would become terrific like the Revolutions she had learnt by heart in Histories if an outbreak in the kitchen should crown them; and to promote that prospect she had through Susan’s eyes more than one glimpse of the way in which Revolutions are prepared. To listen to Susan was to gather that the spark applied to the inflammables and already causing them to crackle would prove to have been the circumstance of one’s being called a horrid low thief for refusing to part with one’s own. (*WMK* 149-51)

O dinheiro era excessivo, até mesmo para um fiacre de história de fadas, e na ausência da senhora Beale, a qual, apesar do adiantado da hora, ainda não tinha voltado para o Regent’s Park, Susan Ash, no vestíbulo, tão vociferante quanto Maisie era discreta, tão ousada quanto a menina era tímida, apontou, em meio às moedas exibidas à luz mortiça do lampião, que tornava o lugar tão diferente da sala iluminada de onde a menina vinha, a meia-coroa que seria o mínimo cobrado por um cocheiro de poucas luzes. Ao que parecia, a senhora Beale ainda haveria de demorar algum tempo para chegar, e neste ínterim Maisie foi prontamente induzida por Susan não apenas a deitar-se como uma boa menina mas também, como expressão ainda mais forte de sua boa natureza, consagrar ao pagamento de obrigações gerais e específicas uma das moedas de uma libra que formavam, dispostas de modo ordenado, um espetáculo naturalmente tão deslumbrante para uma criadinha órfã quanto o era para o alvo das manipulações de um quarteto. Esta jovem foi dormir com sua propriedade guardada dentro de um lenço retorcido, o maior que ela encontrou, debaixo de seu travesseiro; mas as explicações que, na manhã seguinte, foram dadas à senhora Beale, como não podia deixar de ser, de modo mais completo do que a sua humilde amiga na véspera, culminaram numa entrega mais decorosamente espontânea. Sem dúvida, a senhora Beale tinha explicações a dar além de as pedir, e delas a mais surpreendente foi a de que era abominável uma menininha aceitar dinheiro da mais vil das mulheres. As moedas foram examinadas com alguma atenção, porém esta operação teve o efeito de levar a autora da afirmação a refletir que, afinal de contas, aquele dinheiro não podia ser visto senão como o estipêndio do pecado. Sua amiga limitou-se a perguntar o que faria com ele; em resposta, a senhora Beale, que a essa altura já havia colocado as moedas no bolso, respondeu com dignidade, e com a mão no lugar: “Vamos devolvê-las

imediatamente!”. Susan, como a menina ficou sabendo logo em seguida, fora convidada a contribuir para este ato de restituição com a moeda de que se apropriara; porém demonstrou seu apego ao tesouro quando confidenciou a Maisie, em particular, que dela ninguém fazia “gato-sapato”. Maisie abriu-se totalmente com a senhora Beale a respeito das transações da noite anterior; porém via-se agora ouvindo da subalterna indignada comentários que refletiam de modo candente no comportamento da dona da casa. Um deles dizia respeito à hora extraordinária — três da manhã, se a menina estava mesmo interessada em saber — em que a senhora Beale chegara em casa; outro, evitado de solecismos com relação aos quais as críticas de Maisie ainda permaneciam tácitas, caracterizava os apelos da patroa como o maior “bissurdo” de que ela jamais tomara conhecimento; um terceiro comentário abordava em profundidade a questão das enormes dívidas que a dona da casa contrairia com a criadagem, que trabalhava de graça e se dedicava sem recompensa. De fato, por vários dias a consciência de nossa amiga foi dominada pela apreensão gerada pela persistência da indignação de sua criada. Estes dias se tornariam tão terríveis quando as revoluções sobre as quais ela decorara tantas coisas nos livros de história se fossem coroados por alguma explosão na cozinha; e mais de uma vez os olhos de Susan lhe proporcionaram uma imagem vívida da origem das revoluções. Ao ouvir Susan, Maisie concluiu que a fagulha que se acendera em meio às substâncias inflamáveis e já detonara o incêndio fora o ato de chamar de ladra desprezível alguém que se recusava a abrir mão do que era seu. (*POM* 164-5)

This is, I believe, a fairly representative long paragraph in *WMK*, and it opens with a sentence that illustrates the sort of multiple interpolation we have seen before. The translation of “who” by *a qual* here is favored by the fact that the relative pronoun is an isolated tone unit, thus requiring extra stress, a situation in which *a qual* is clearly more appropriate than the weak particle *que*. This paragraph and its translation could be examined from a number of angles, but I would like to concentrate on one particular aspect: a certain “normalization” of James’s idiosyncratic style which is apparent in the translation, and which seems inconsistent with my belief that the roundaboutness of James’s late style is a functional aspect of it rather than a mannerism. For this it will be enough to examine the first few sentences.

One notices, to begin with, that the alliterative pairs loud-low and bold-bland are lost in translation — not a very serious loss, perhaps, since alliteration in Portuguese prose is a rather less productive device than it is in English. In the second sentence there is a subtle bit of free indirect speech — “like a darling dear” — which is perhaps not as noticeable in the translation “*como uma boa menina*.” The second occurrence of free indirect speech, later on in the selection — “if she really wanted to know” — was somewhat more successfully rendered as “*se a menina estava mesmo interessada em saber*” (with a curiously Lusitanian inflection in “*a menina*”). But to return to the second sentence, here we have a typically Jamesian passage, including a double-negative construction, “not less dazzling,” and indirect ways of referring to the characters, Susan as “a lone orphan of a housemaid,” Maisie as “the subject of the manœuvres of a quartette” (one of my favorite Jamesianisms, by the way). In my translation the double negative is gone, and though I have preserved the two indirect references to Susan and Maisie I have not repeated “*alvo*” in the beginning of the next sentence — probably



because Portuguese is less tolerant of repetitions, but also because the masculine gender of “alvo” would make for excessive awkwardness. A wholly inexplicable omission is that of “on the dressing-table upstairs.” A similar simplification of the original can be found elsewhere in the paragraph — for instance, compare “from a woman who was simply the vilest of her sex” with “*da mais vil das mulheres*”, or “but a closer clutch of the treasure showed in her private assurance to Maisie that there was a limit to the way she could be ‘done’” with “*porém demonstrou seu apego ao tesouro quando confidenciou a Maisie, em particular, que dela ninguém fazia ‘gato-sapato.’*”

The overall effect of these changes is to make the text more “normal,” less convoluted, and thus less typical of James’s late style. Since I had set out with the conscious intention of reproducing James’s idiosyncrasies in Portuguese as closely as possible, because, as I have stated, I believe they are functional components of his style, one wonders what sort of forces, perhaps unconscious, could be at work here. My own hypothesis, if the reader will be as kind as to allow me to indulge once again in more or less wild speculations, is that this is the effect of my own personal preference for a plain style. However great my admiration for James, my real models in fiction are writers like Machado de Assis and Kafka, whose unadorned, sharp prose I have emulated since I began to take writing seriously. Thus it seems that my conscious attempt to reproduce James’s late style in Portuguese was sabotaged at some point in the process of translation by an unconscious urge to tone down what seemed to me its excesses. The moral of the story is, perhaps, that in translation — as, indeed, in just about any human activity — we are always to a certain extent at the mercy of our unconscious motives. As Maria Paula Frota observes, the interpretive chains in the minds of translators are overdetermined by unconscious desire: “*não é possível ao tradutor a isenção que em geral lhe é exigida*” (Frota 1996: 89).

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