

This essay examines the relationship between gift-giving and violence in texts about the Oedipus complex. It argues that in Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew* and Wes Anderson's film *Rushmore*, a secondary repression is enabled by narrative techniques that mobilize a collective act of forgetting through the enjoyment of plot.

What Maxie Knew: The Gift and Oedipus in *What Maisie Knew* and *Rushmore*

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The small expanding consciousness would have to be saved, have to become presentable as a register of impressions; and saved by the experience of certain advantages, by some enjoyed profit and some achieved confidence, rather than coarsened, blurred, sterilized, by ignorance and pain. —Henry James, Preface to What Maisie Knew

*Max Fischer to Miss Cross: "At least no one got hurt."
"Except you," she replies.
"Nah. I didn't get hurt that bad."—Wes Anderson, Rushmore*

In a recent paper on violence and deconstruction, Elizabeth Grosz suggests that violence is "the unspoken condition of a certain fantasy of the sustainability of its various others or opposites, peace, love and so on" (8). What

Grosz is discussing here is the relationship between deconstruction's interest in a certain foundational violence, the arché-writing that inscribes the "thing-in-itself" into a system of representation, and a "second, 'reparatory' or compensatory violence, the violence whose function is to erase the traces of this primordial violence" (10)—the violence of the law or of reason. The legitimating structures of law function in this paradigm as the site of fantasy—that which enables us to engage in a collective act of

forgetting about the originary violence of representation itself. Narrative, especially a particular kind of narrative, functions as another such site of utopianist forgetting: the story of the end of childhood, and its denial of the violence of the Oedipus complex.

In the epigraphs above, two texts which take as their subject and theme the loss of childhood innocence in the resolution of the Oedipus complex both deny the pain of that resolution for the children involved. Not completely deny, of course: James leaves open the possibility that Maisie will perhaps be *slightly* “coarsened, blurred, sterilized” by the pain of her ordeal, and Max admits to his adult love object only that he was not hurt “that bad.” Nevertheless, the denial remains—even as it is, necessarily, refracted, expressed, and resolved differently for the boy and the girl. Both authors implicitly argue that regardless of a few bumps and bruises along the way, everything turns out all right in the end; as readers and viewers we are invited to experience these endings as restorative, even though both narratives have insisted quite strenuously on the pain and suffering—even to the point of physical violence—endured by their main characters.

Aside from their similar histories of violent repression, these central characters could not be more different. Where Maisie is (at least initially) befuddled and trusting, Max is shrewd and circumspect. Where Maisie enacts her creator’s desire to explore a character who “resist[s] [...] the strain of observation and the assault of experience” (*Maisie* xi), Max is characterized early on in the film as someone who “seem[s] to have it pretty figured out.” Even more importantly, the trajectory of each character’s Oedipal drama is quite different, as Freud’s discussion of gender difference in childhood psychosexual development would insist: this sexual difference, in fact, suggests an explanation for why Maisie resists the “assault of experience” while Max embraces it. Yet the two narratives also share a deeper affinity than a characterological sketch of their protagonists would allow. Both are concerned with the power and powerlessness of children, and the ways in which children negotiate and participate in adult violence. Both texts are utopianist wish-fulfillments that enact certain fantasies of and about childhood. The first-order fantasy is the wish of infantile/pubescent sexuality, that the child will somehow end up with his or her “final” (heterosexual) Oedipal object: Maisie will live happily ever after with Claude, and Max will ... something or other with his beloved Miss Cross, a first-grade teacher at the prep school where Max is in his sophomore year. I am more concerned here with the second-order fantasy these narratives mobilize: a fantasy which renders palatable the violence of the resolution of the Oedipus complex in the same way that the legitimating structures of the law that Grosz discusses paper over the originary violence of representation. And that second-order fantasy is precisely and baldly just that: a denial of the effects of psychological violence, a denial of the nature of these narrative events *as violent*.

These first- and second-order fantasies correspond to what we might call the primary and secondary violence of the Oedipus complex. While the originary violence is the “castration” of the child—which, according to Freud, the boy fears may happen and the girl assumes already has (“Dissolution” 178)—the secondary violence is the traumatic denial of (and by) the adult love object. What enables, and perhaps even constitutes, this second-order violence is an intensified version of the mechanism of repression. According to Freud, beyond the repression of those images and ideas associated with hostility toward the mother (in girls) and the symbolic murder of the father (in boys), there is a surplus of violence: “But the process we have described is more than a repression. It is equivalent, if it is ideally carried out, to a destruction and an abolition [*Zerstörung und Aufhebung*] of the complex” (“Dissolution” 177; “Untergang” 399). Only metaphors of violent annihilation are equal to the descriptive task. In a later essay, Freud suggests that this complete demolition might be the prerogative only of male children: “In boys [...] the complex is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration. [...] In girls the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking. [...] [I]t may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression” (“Some” 257). As feminist critics of psychoanalysis have argued, this lingering residue is figured as constitutive of a uniquely feminine dejection; according to Luce Irigaray, for example, Freud’s description of femininity “crosschecks with the symptoms of melancholia” (66). However, in his late essay “Female Sexuality,” Freud returns to the problem of the female Oedipus complex and suggests that for girls, the work of abandoning the mother as primary object might necessitate something like the boy’s violent “dissolution”: “Everything in the sphere of this first attachment to the mother seemed to me so difficult to grasp in analysis [...] that it was as if it had succumbed to an especially inexorable repression” (226).

Freud is clear that in both cases the process of abandoning the Oedipal object is accompanied by intensely difficult psychic work. This dissolution/repression of the complex, I would like to suggest, both enables and is enabled by adults’ affectionate and indulgent consumption of narratives depicting the Oedipal trauma. In his review of *Rushmore*, *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane notes that the film is primarily concerned with “the unquenchable (if stubbornly unrequited) need for underage sex” (214). Oedipal desire—one particular kind of underage sex—is both unquenchable and (parenthetically) unrequited: the emotional violence is an alchemical by-product of the interaction of these two characteristics. But why “(unrequited)”? As adults who have presumably resolved, with greater or lesser success, our own Oedipal dramas, we seem to remember the unquenchability part, but not quite the unrequitedness: Lane’s

own sentence dramatizes this forgetting through the use of parenthesis. This forgetting is enacted, reinforced, and enabled through the coming-of-age story.

In other words, the Oedipus complex is, as Freud insists in *Totem and Taboo*, not merely a private drama of psychic pain: it is a social and collective violence that we consume repeatedly through narratives about loss of childhood innocence, even as we take comfort in their ambivalent promises that no one really got hurt. We might think of this repeated consumption of the Oedipal tale as functioning in a manner analogous to Peter Brooks's Freudian "masterplot": just as we restage the binding of psychic energy through narrative repetition and resolution (90–112), so we revisit the loss of the childhood object in a melancholic retelling of the coming-of-age story. In both of my emblematic texts, real emotional and even physical violence is done to the protagonists; James's preface and Max's assurance seem disingenuous precisely because of this violence.

In both texts, ironically, these denials are enacted through complex economies of gift-giving. As psychoanalysis reminds us, there is a compensation in store for the child who resolves his or her Oedipus complex successfully: the promise of the gift—phallic authority for the boy, the "penis-substitute" baby for the girl—is a reparation to the child for forswearing the love of the inappropriate parental object. These compensations fail, as compensations always do; while the girl's loss is arguably more abject (since its reparation is less satisfying), there is of course no adequate substitute for the primary object for either gender. Both *Rushmore* and *What Maisie Knew* stage this inadequacy by exploring the formation and destruction of intergenerational relationships through the giving, receiving, and spectacular *failure* of gifts. In this way, the "other" of violence Grosz speaks about takes the form of a particular relation to the possibility of the gift, a possibility that Jacques Derrida suggests comes about only in narrative. In his *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, he discusses the crucial role of deferral in Marcel Mauss's account of the gift: "The gift only gives to the extent that it gives time. [...] What it gives, the gift, is time, but this gift of time is also a demand of time. [...] This is one of the reasons this thing of the gift will be linked to the—internal—necessity of a certain narrative or of a certain poetics of narrative. [...] The thing as given thing, the given of the gift arrives, if it arrives, only in narrative" (41). For Derrida, the gift as such is impossible, since in order to *be* a *gift* (not to be debt or promise or exchange), it must not present itself as such: it must be perfectly forgotten, even beyond the ordinary operations of repression, by both donor and donee. In this sense it is an analogue to the material of the boy's Oedipal drama, which must be not only repressed but utterly "destroyed." For this reason also we might think of the possibility of the gift as inherently masculine, since the girl does not necessarily undergo the process of *Zerstörung* at the resolution of her

Oedipus complex. Perhaps the closest one can get to a gift is the compensation the boy receives for giving up his Oedipal object—close, but of course no cigar.

We might note here the somewhat ironic status of the gift as a potential “other” to violence—ironic not only because of the perfectly destructive forgetting necessary for its operation, but also because the entire tradition of writing on the gift inherited from Mauss has insisted on the interarticulation of violence and the gift. For Bataille, for example, the gift given in potlatch is only one of a number of possible destructive events (such as sacrifice, death, and luxurious consumption) which serve to eliminate or squander excess economic energy (63–77). Derrida implicitly addresses this paradox in *Given Time*: “Even though all the anthropologies, indeed the metaphysics of the gift have, *quite rightly and justifiably*, treated *together*, as a system, the gift and the debt, the gift and the cycle of restitution, the gift and the loan, the gift and credit, the gift and the counter-gift, we are here *departing* [...] from this tradition. [...] We will take our point of departure in the dissociation, in the overwhelming evidence of this other axiom: There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system” (13). It is part of the work of Derrida’s text to sever the relationships that Mauss, and the anthropological tradition, have insisted upon between the gift and the violence of potlatch—exchange, reparation, and exorbitant expenditure. It is part of the work of my essay to think about how this particular kind of narrative conflates violence and gift-giving; if, as Derrida asserts, the gift is not only radically *other than* exchange (including the violence of potlatch), but also fundamentally impossible, then we can expect the attempted gift to betray this failure through its affinity with violence: this is what we might call the symptom of the gift.

In our two emblematic texts, we can see precisely this confusion of violence and gift-giving, even as the characters involved struggle desperately to mark their difference. I am going to look more closely at two related examples: the complex of associations and metaphors that cluster, in each narrative, around the word “hand.” “Hand” as a word is particularly cogent for my purposes, since it is central both to descriptions of, and acts of, giving *and* violence. One “gives a hand” and “hands it to someone,” as well as “falls into the hands of,” “hands over,” or knocks out by a “right (or left) hand”—in addition, of course, to “being handled,” “handling,” “manhandling.” Both *What Maisie Knew* and *Rushmore* make ample use of this lexical richness in their descriptions of the power and powerlessness of their young protagonists. In *What Maisie Knew* the metaphor of “handling” forms the hinge between sexuality, violence, and the gift. Hand imagery is everywhere in the novel; as Jeff Westover writes in a recent article on the novel, the “shifting dynamic of power relations

between Maisie and the other characters [...] may be charted and interpreted [...] by focusing on a particular gesture that recurs throughout the book: the laying of one's hand upon that of another person" (201). I would extend Westover's insight by noting that hand imagery in the novel operates even more insistently on a *metaphorical* register: for every instance of Maisie being pushed or prodded by someone's actual hand, she is described as being "in the hands of"—her parents, fate, chance, the law. In fact, this first group of culpable subjects, Maisie's parents, are so consistently described in the language of violent handling that one finishes the book with a strong impression of flattening hugs, jewel-encrusted bosoms, bristling moustaches, brutal pats, rough shoves, and painful pinches.

Yet this is only half of our violence/gift picture; the other half involves the giving of, the lending of, the laying on of, hands. Westover claims that the gift given by Sir Claude to Maisie, which is conferred through a particular kind of touch, is the gift of "freedom"—presumably, her freedom from the constraining and violent social and familial structures imposed on her by her natural parents and by the law. Yet as Westover does not acknowledge, "freedom" is a complicated and indeterminate concept in this novel. The first instance of this word occurs at the very beginning of the text, when we are introduced to the deleterious system of custody in which Maisie is to be reared:

The child was provided for, but the new arrangement was inevitably confounding to a young intelligence intensely aware that something had happened which must matter a good deal and looking anxiously out for the effects of so great a cause. [...] The greatest effect of the great cause was her own greater importance, chiefly revealed to her in the larger freedom with which she was handled, pulled hither and thither and kissed, and the proportionately greater niceness she was obliged to show. Her features had somehow become prominent; they were so perpetually nipped by the gentlemen who came to see her father and the smoke of whose cigarettes went into her face. Some of these gentlemen made her strike matches and light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees violently jolted, pinched the calves of her legs till she shrieked. (9–10)

The "freedom with which she was handled" signals, of course, the freedom of her handlers, not the freedom of the handled.

They are free, these male friends of her father's, to pull and kiss and pinch her, to lay their hands on her in what we would now call "inappropriate" ways; our first glimpse of freedom in the novel, on its very first page, is a freedom (from restraint, propriety, decency) which implicates a young girl in a frightening and violent display of adult sexuality.

This first instance of the word "freedom" in the novel signals an ambiguity at the

heart of the word; this ambiguity is developed and expanded throughout the rest of the narrative, where the word “freedom” occurs some half-a-dozen more times, instances divided evenly between descriptions of Maisie and descriptions of her step-parents. In the case of the latter, the word always refers to a loosening of the bonds of obligation in marriage; Sir Claude is free from Ida, Mrs. Beale is free from Maisie’s father. (In fact, James uses the word in the Preface to the novel, where he refers to the “freedom of divorce” [vii] that he has envisioned setting the machinery of his plot in motion.) This usage of the word refers in these instances to the quaint notion of “squaring” that the characters develop in their relations with each other, a notion to which I will return shortly. On the other hand, when the word “freedom” is associated with Maisie, it always refers to her expanding consciousness, her sharpening understanding and awareness, which is, of course, the centre of James’s theoretical and artistic project: “These days brought on a high quickening of Maisie’s direct perceptions, of her sense of freedom to make out things for herself” (99); “Maisie could borrow from the contemplative hush of their grandeur the freedom to feel to the utmost” (278); “[Maisie’s] mind had never moved in such freedom as on thus finding itself face to face with the question of what she wanted to get” (300). As her opportunities for freedom increase, or more properly speaking, as the events of the novel begin to converge in such a way that she will ultimately be able to take possession of epistemological and personal “freedom” simultaneously, Maisie is handled less and less.

Maisie’s freedom, however, retains an ambiguous status throughout the novel. While she may be less subject to violent handling as she grows older, her relationship with Sir Claude is increasingly eroticized and described in the language of adult sexuality—her “freedom” is never entirely untangled from the Oedipal infrastructure of the novel. This is one of the key differences between the histories of Maisie and Max: *What Maisie Knew* traces its protagonist’s entire family romance, from Maisie’s pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother, to her homoerotic affection for Mrs. Beale, to her “final” Oedipal configuration of heteronormative love for Sir Claude, to her ultimate renunciation of him at the end of the novel. I will concentrate on the last two stages at this point in my analysis, since this is the portion of Maisie’s story that parallels that of Max in *Rushmore*.

In the second half of the novel, James is at pains to describe the sexualized love of Maisie for Sir Claude. Maisie’s own mother accuses the young girl of courting a quasi-erotic relation with her stepfather: “You hang about him in a way that’s barely decent—he can do what he likes with you” (90). Later, when she comes across Maisie and Claude on an outing together in Kensington Gardens, she demands of him, “What are you doing with my daughter?” (124). Whether seeming to accuse Maisie or

Claude of being the culprit, Ida insists upon the perverse nature of their relationship. Claude seems to invite the accusation; at one point he almost suggests that he ought to distrust his feelings for Maisie—"I *should* be in fear if you were older" (106)—and at another the narrator reports his feelings to us through free indirect discourse: "if he was to have the credit of perverting the innocent child he might also at least have the amusement" (94). At times their relationship seems almost a parody of antiquated courtship: Claude's behaviour toward Maisie, like that of a mid-Victorian suitor, has exposed him to "the presumption of having created expectations" (93); Maisie, like a mid-Victorian maiden, has "such possibilities of vibration, of response" (148) that she can feel, in the face of Sir Claude's judgement, a "full hot rush of an emotion more mature than any she had yet known" (109).

The emphasis in the later portions of the novel on the Maisie-Claude matrix is enabled by what we might call a disavowal of the text itself: Maisie has already had to renounce her love for Ida and Mrs. Beale in order to enter into the Oedipus complex, the tricky negotiation that Freud argues only girls must undergo—boys need not renounce their originary love for the mother in order to end up in the "proper" heterosexual Oedipal position ("Some" 251ff.). While Freud is quite clear that the boy's post-Oedipal "gift," his reward for renouncing his mother as a sexual object, is his proper place in culture, the girl's only compensation is the desire for a baby, a "gift" which is a substitute for what both genders supposedly really want and only the boy has—the phallus ("Dissolution" 178). It is hardly surprising that the cycle of gift exchanges in the novel should be so fraught, so ambivalent, so unsatisfactory for the young girl. Her being handled less hardly compensates for the attenuated nature of her putative "freedom" as depicted by James.

In *What Maisie Knew*, the metaphor of "handling" reveals the interdependence of sexuality, violence, and the gift. In *Rushmore*, the repeated trope of the hand—more specifically, the "hand job"—reminds us even more forcefully of the interarticulation of these three terms. To put the repetition of the phrase in context: Max Fischer, our young hero and a student at Rushmore Academy, has simultaneously befriended Herman Blume (played by Bill Murray), a local steel magnate, and fallen in love with Miss Cross, a first-grade teacher at Rushmore. He manages to bring these two adults together—his Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale—along with himself and his young chapel partner and sidekick, Dirk Calloway, in a quasi-familial structure. Along the way, he betrays his friend Dirk by claiming, in order to impress the school bully, that Dirk's mother had granted Max a hand job in the back seat of her Jaguar, and in turn is betrayed by Herman and Miss Cross, who inadvertently fall in love behind his back. The sidekick, Dirk, discovers the adults' affair, and decides to keep the information to

himself in order to avoid hurting his friend Max—until the bully informs him of the lie that Max had told about his mother. At this point Dirk writes a “friendly” note to Max (in crayon!), telling him that he “secretly found out” about the adults’ love affair when he caught Mr. Blume and Miss Cross “giving each other hand jobs” in Blume’s swimming pool while Max was napping on the front porch. The trope makes its final major appearance in the most brilliantly queasy-making scene in the film: Max confronts Miss Cross after she has resigned from Rushmore (thanks in part to Max’s vengeful smear campaign), and they meet in her classroom as she is packing up her belongings. Max makes an awkward pass at her, and she responds furiously, pushing him away until he falls into a pile of cardboard boxes: “What do you really think is going to happen between us? Do you think we’re going to have sex? [...] How would you describe it to your friends? Would you say that you fingered me? Or maybe I could give you a hand job—would that put an end to all of this?” By this point in the film, we are more sympathetic to Miss Cross than horrified by her brutally blunt treatment of Max: we understand the spectacle of an authoritative adult at the limit of her patience, using every means at her disposal to “wake up” the obtuse teenager stubbornly pursuing her.

There are several things that need to be said about the obsessive figure of the hand job in this film. First of all, we must consider the term in its complete form: to *give* a hand job. The hand job is a gift, or is figured as a gift, one which is at least potentially non-reciprocal, an act of devotion and generosity. Two (or more) people can exchange hand jobs just as they can exchange gifts—the term can technically refer to the masturbation of another person of either gender, as Dirk’s lie attests—but there is a temporal rhythm to this potential reciprocity, a deferral or delay which signals that we are indeed in the realm of the gift. However, the giving of hand jobs in this film seems at times to partake of something more like potlatch. The promise, threat, and boast of the hand job *circulates* here according to a particular economic logic. Max lies about getting a hand job from an older woman, an inappropriate/Oedipal object; Magnus uses the lie as currency to disrupt the friendship of Max and Dirk; Dirk picks up the token and passes it on by lying to Max about Mr. Blume’s and Miss Cross’s exchange of hand jobs; Miss Cross uses the intimidation of a hand job to awaken Max to his unrealistic desire for her—an older woman and inappropriate/Oedipal object.

Yet Miss Cross’s “threat” is double-edged. She sarcastically asks if Max would like a hand job, but then demands if he will tell his friends that he “fingered” her. The difference between the two terms is instructive: while Dirk’s lie and Max’s gullible acceptance of it de-emphasize the difference between male and female genitalia, Miss

Cross's retort insists upon it—or at least upon its psychoanalytic configuration. According to Freud, the girl must undergo two simultaneous psychosexual developments before the latency period: she must abandon the clitoris and accept vaginal (feminine) sexuality even as she renounces her mother as love object and enters the Oedipal stage (“Female” 225ff.). By imagining Miss Cross as the recipient of hand jobs, Max insists upon her clitoral sexuality: she is the fantasized phallic mother. Miss Cross, however, educates Max about his “mistake”: part of Max's Oedipal drama involves recognizing the culturally degraded status of his substitute mother, her availability to a potentially violent penetrative “fingering” of which he could be the agent. By dramatizing her status as object in this way, the film reminds the viewer of the compensation in store for Max; as Teresa de Lauretis argues, in “cinema [...] woman properly represents the fulfilment of the narrative promise (made, as we know, to the little boy), and that representation works to support the male status of the mythical subject” (88). We might also think of Miss Cross as staging here what Judith Butler calls “gender melancholy”: by refiguring Max's hand job as a fingering, she illustrates the culturally mandated emphasis on her properly “heterosexual” body parts (Butler 71). The hand job is a gift only the masculine can use.

It is important to remember that no one actually gives or receives a single hand job in this film. And this brings us to a second crucial point. As a sexual transaction without a reproductive aim—what Freud would call perverse—the act in question is the *sine qua non* of infantile sexuality. It is all the child can imagine about adult sexuality, or more precisely all the child can imagine the adult will *give* him or her. The hand, in fantasized contact with a child's (or teenager's) genitals, is the point of connection across a generational and epistemological divide. It is all Max can boast, all Dirk can imagine, all Miss Cross can threaten. It is Maisie's introduction to adult sexuality, the sexuality of adults. (She is jolted violently on a grown-up knee; she is pinched; she shrieks and “her shriek [is] much admired” [10].) The hand job is also the point of connection, the hinge, between an act of generosity and an act of violence. The imagined act is simultaneously promise and threat; one *gives* someone a hand job (a gift), one *beats* someone off. As Freud reminds us in “A Child is Being Beaten,” the infantile masturbatory fantasy of a child being beaten by a parental figure—the heart of repressed Oedipal material—is unconsciously conflated with receiving pleasure from that same adult. A child is being beaten ... off.

A montage sequence that occurs later in *Rushmore* throws into even sharper relief this complex of violence and giving. Immediately after Max discovers that Mr. Blume and Miss Cross are romantically involved, he avenges himself on his former friend, first by telling Blume's wife about the affair, which lands Herman in a hotel while he

is being sued for divorce. The sequence begins with Blume at a table in his white terry-cloth hotel robe, peacefully eating breakfast and reading the paper, when he notices a bee, and then two, three, then dozens of bees buzzing around his head. He leaps up from the table, swatting at them furiously with his paper, and then spots the plastic tube slipped under his hotel-room door from which the bees are emanating. A maniacal grin spreads slowly across his face, and we cut to Max in a borrowed hotel-staff white coat carrying his bee-keeping equipment off the elevator as the opening strains of a Who song begin to play. The rest of the montage features, in order: Blume cutting the lock on Max's bike, throwing it on the ground and running his Bentley back and forth across it before carefully re-locking it in the rack; Max riding (on a new girl's bike, with a bell!) to Blume's factory, then slipping under his car with some ominous-looking tools; Blume driving onto the Rushmore campus, flooring his severed brakes, and then gliding harmlessly to a stop after terrified students scatter from in front of his car; Blume giving a physical description of Max to the police; and finally a close-up of Max's hands cuffed behind his back as he is led away down the halls of his new school.

This sequence is obviously about violence, but it is also about pleasure and fun. The two rivals are engaged in play, trading communicative acts of violence—pranks, almost—that are as much about mutual appreciation as they are about harm. The lyrics to the Who song playing in the background attest to this paradox: “You are forgiven.” Because the lyrical pronouncement is in the present tense, yet is simultaneous with the performance of the pranks, it takes on a different valence: you are always *already* forgiven, even as you are engaging in the very act for which you will have to be forgiven. The first non-obsolete meaning of “forgive” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “to give up resentment or claim to requital for.” To give up—give, in effect, to one's rival—one's claim to requital. Even as Max and Herman are engaging precisely in acts of resentment and requital, they are giving up the claims to these acts; these claims are freely given, then, one to the other.

The playful “revenge montage” is the narratological crux of the film. Immediately after this sequence (after Max's father has bailed him out of jail), Max goes to the Rushmore campus, where he is ambushed by Dirk and his friends with stones and then gets into a single-punch “fight” with Magnus, after which Dirk pointedly refuses to take his hand as he lies on the ground looking up at him for help. This relentless build-up of violence, revenge, and painful revelation is followed by a flood of gift-giving. Margaret Yang tries to cheer up Max (who has dropped out of school and is working in his father's barbershop) with the gift of a small jade plant she brings to his house; Dirk comes to the barbershop and presents Max with an engraved “Rushmore

Yankee” Swiss Army knife as a peace offering; Max gives Mr. Blume one of the two achievement pins he earned during his years at Rushmore (for “punctuality”); Max convinces Blume to dedicate most of his fortune to building an aquarium for Miss Cross; Max offers Magnus a lead part in the new play he is producing. The central event in this second sequence is the appearance of Dirk with the knife. As the two boys tacitly acknowledge, the circulation of the poisonous “hand job” has been the disruptive force in their young friendship. Max: “I’m sorry about what I said about your mom giving me a hand job.” Dirk: “I know, Max. I’m sorry I didn’t take your hand when Buchan kicked your ass.”

The gift and violence are inseparable and interdependent in these texts. If we think about the logic of the Oedipus complex, then this interarticulation makes perfect sense. The kernel of the complex is a substitution, a reparation for sacrifice, a compensation which haunts the unconscious (and presumably the halls of culture), only to return in yet another degree of substitution as the symptom. According to Jacqueline Rose, Lacan uses the term “paternal metaphor” to refer to this phenomenon partly as “a reference to the act of substitution (substitution is the very law of metaphoric operation), whereby the prohibition of the father takes up the place originally figured by the absence of the mother” (38–9). The reparatory gift of the phallus and its various substitutes is predicated on a sacrifice that is predicated on a fantasized act of violence.

We can thus see the violent gift, the gift-as-violence, operating at the level of narrative structure in both *What Maisie Knew* and *Rushmore*. In both texts, the attempted (and *failed*) gift takes the form of an attempted “squaring” of accounts, an attempted economic reparation. What each text rehearses is precisely what Derrida would call the failure of the gift, the impossibility of the gift as such—as anything other than an economic transaction. Furthermore, these acts of “squaring” are what provide the structure of the narratives in which they appear. We can think of *What Maisie Knew* as having a structure of repetition somewhat akin to that of a fairy tale. In the beginning the “heavy hand of justice” (6) achieves a squaring: Ida and Beale squabble over Maisie in open court, and because Beale cannot return the child-support money he has already squandered, a catastrophic compromise in the form of joint custody is reached. Maisie functions in this scenario as a kind of poisoned gift: she is given over and given up repeatedly throughout this first section of the novel, and the familial structure thus set in place is, from Maisie’s perspective, a disaster. A second round of “squaring” sets up the second familial structure; her step-parents Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale become Maisie’s surrogate parents, a situation enabled by her biological parents agreeing to “square” it with their respective spouses: to give “freedom,” in this case, from the marriage bond. (The first

appearance of the word is in chapter 13, when Sir Claude explains to Maisie that he has “squared” Maisie’s mother: “I mean that your mother lets me do what I want so long as I let her do what *she* wants” [113].) Again, disaster ensues for Maisie: she is forced to witness the sexual machinations of Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude, who cannot separate but cannot quite commit to living together openly in defiance of custom, and to negotiate between them and Mrs. Wix, who is outraged at their flouting of “morality” (a word she repeats obsessively throughout the latter part of the novel). The final failed attempt at squaring is Maisie’s offer to Sir Claude to give up Mrs. Wix if he will give up Mrs. Beale. He will not, or he cannot, and this refusal of squaring allows the narrative to come to an end, a utopian end which recuperates the harm done to Maisie as it gestures toward a possible “happy ending” of sorts with Mrs. Wix.

Squaring does not work because the “crimes” of the novel are resistant to reparation. According to Neil Hertz, the novel enacts a “thematics of sacrifice and compensation” (67). I agree wholeheartedly, and yet would add the word “failed” before “compensation.” The novel is deeply suspicious of substitutions, of attempts to “square” through replacement. At a crucial point toward the end of the novel, which foreshadows Maisie’s ability to step outside the structure of squaring that the adults continually repeat, Maisie finally understands that “she was perhaps playing the passive part in a case of violent substitution” (225). This is, of course, the role she has been playing all along, and this moment of insight signals the folding of Maisie’s epistemological perspective into that of the reader—Maisie now understands her situation as “violent,” as the narrator has been indicating to the reader throughout the entire novel. She now grasps the passive role culturally marked out for her as a girl: she is to be the exchanged, not the exchanger. (Just as Max must learn the active role reserved for him, as “fingerer.”) Yet Maisie is not the only one who acts as a token of exchange in the circuit of substitutions that constitutes familial relations in the novel: when Mrs. Wix returns to Maisie for the last time, she indicates her emotional availability to her young charge by “spread[ing] herself into an exhibition that, combined with her intensity and her decorations, appeared to suggest her for strange offices and devotions, for ridiculous replacements and substitutions” (201). Substitutions, when not violent, are at the very least “ridiculous.” James continually warns the reader of the incommensurability of objects of exchange: there is a loss—painful, perhaps absurd—in every attempt at replacement.

Rushmore is equally suspicious of “squaring,” and enacts a similar repetitious structure to posit its final impossibility. The first time that Max alienates one of his pseudo-parents—when he humiliates Miss Cross by declaring his love for her in public—he attempts to make reparation through a bizarre act of sumptuary expenditure: by building her an aquarium with money he does not have on land he does not own.

She refuses his gesture, his gift, and just as in *Maisie*, “squaring” fails to achieve the desired result: Max is instead expelled from Rushmore Academy. The next alienation occurs when Max declares war on Mr. Blume for having an affair with Miss Cross behind his back. After the requisite hijinks ensue and Herman and Miss Cross have actually stopped dating, Max once again attempts to reconstitute his substitute family, this time by “giving” the aquarium idea to Mr. Blume, who sets out to spend eight million of his ten-million-dollar fortune on the doomed project. Once again, Miss Cross fails to show up for the grand opening. Things are only made right in the end when Max steps outside the economy of reparation; he writes and stages a play about Vietnam, tricks Mr. Blume and Miss Cross into sitting next to each other at the performance, and publicly dedicates the play jointly to his mother and to Miss Cross’s husband Edward Appleby, both dead—and thus both unalterably outside and beyond the economic system of reparation which would start the cycle of violence and of narrative all over again. In the final scenes of the film, we see Max prepared to live happily ever after with his appropriate Mrs. Wix of a high-school girlfriend, Margaret Yang.

The difference between the two narratives is that Max is largely the agent of attempted reparations, while Maisie is usually their victim. This has a certain gendered logic: while Max must learn to take his place in culture as an active agent, a creature with a developed super-ego and a robust sense of justice, Maisie’s fate, according to Freud (and James), is to learn passivity and jealousy, and wallow in moral ambiguity (“Some” 257–58). As a girl, she cannot be a giver, only a gift. The two stories share an important similarity, however: in each case, the refusal of squaring is aligned with a certain shift in epistemological perspective which is perhaps attendant upon the resolution of the Oedipus complex. The endings of both texts, utopianist as they are, also enact a second-order violence which is a denial of the first. What insight is the reader left with at the end of James’s novel? That of Mrs. Wix, who still has “room for wonder at what Maisie knew” (363)—knowledge which, we have already been assured by our author in his Preface, is not only her salvation but also her reason for existence. “I didn’t get hurt that bad,” Max reassures Miss Cross at the very end of *Rushmore*. A statement in direct contradiction of everything we have seen throughout the film—in which Max not only loses his love object, but is hit in the face (by various objects and combatants) no fewer than three times.

If Freud is right, and the Oedipus complex cannot be repressed but must be demolished, then where does repression operate in this schema? Properly speaking, in relation to the memory of attendant psychic pain. We can hear the voice of repression in the syntax of the epigraphs to this essay: “saved by the experience of certain advantages,” “no one got hurt.” The *reality* of violence is disavowed; the ideational content

of violent wishes and desires is repressed. (It is perhaps in the unbridgeable gap between disavowal and repression that we can locate the origin of those qualifiers I have already noted: “*that* bad,” “*certain* advantages,” “*some* enjoyed profit.”)

The ultimate irony of these texts is that their closures mobilize these repressive statements as attempted utopianist escapes from substitution—attempts to step outside the squared circle of compensation and reparation—yet repression is, of course, itself an act of substitution. As Derrida writes about the gift economy, “repression does not destroy or annul anything; it keeps by displacing. Its operation is systemic or topological; it always consists of keeping by exchanging places. And, by keeping the meaning of the gift, repression annuls it in symbolic recognition. However unconscious this recognition may be, it is effective and can be verified in no better fashion than by its effects or by the symptoms it yields up [*qu’elle donne*] for decoding” (16). The potential compensations for Max and Maisie, what they will get in return for repressing both the violence of their desires and the violence of repression itself, is a promised escape from the cycle of promises.

In the end, this impossibility returns as a symptom of the texts themselves. While I have claimed that the endings of these texts are “utopianist” (mobilizing certain wish-fulfillments about the end of childhood), they are by no means “utopian”: in fact, the endings of both novel and film are intensely melancholy. We know that Maisie’s happily-ever-after with Mrs. Wix will forever be haunted by the absence of Sir Claude:

“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. (266)

James allows Maisie a summary moment of intense abject reflection; the sparseness of the language seems to signal the unsymbolizable nature of her loss. She is left to inhabit the feminine melancholic position, to orient her future libidinal attachments in relation to a lost object that simply “wasn’t there.”

The final moments of *Rushmore* are, appropriately, slightly more recuperative; Max is allowed to mourn rather than be melancholy. The closing scene, which is also marked by the protagonist’s last lingering moment with the Oedipal object, shows Max dancing with Miss Cross at the cast party for his play about Vietnam. That play, which is a veritable orgy of staged violence, has brought Miss Cross and Blume together again and left Max to pair off with his new teenage girlfriend. As the star-crossed lovers share a final dance, and Max promises that he really was not hurt that

bad, the lyrics of a Faces song—which Max has specifically requested for this dance—swell over the final credits:

Poor old Granddad
 I laughed at all his words
 I thought he was a bitter man
 He spoke of women's ways
 They trap you, then they use you
 [...]
 I wish that I knew what I know now
 When I was younger
 [...]
 They come on strong and it ain't too long
 Before they make you feel a man
 But love is blind and you soon will find
 You're just a boy again. [...]

The lyrics here function as a kind of voice-over to the end of the film. Max still is a boy, so who can be speaking? A disembodied projection of the “older, wiser” spectator, who is invited to endorse this disavowal by agreeing that Max will be compensated adequately for his loss—if only by a putatively occult misogynist “knowledge.” For different reasons, we are all left to mourn.

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