

## A Place Revisited: The House at *The Jolly Corner*

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*The Jolly Corner*, published in 1908, is one of Henry James's late stories; it is also one of the most autobiographical of his fictions and—a strange combination—one of his “ghost stories.” It is based on his experience of a country and a “place revisited”: James had visited his native country in 1904/05 after a European absence of about twenty years. Similarly, his protagonist Spencer Brydon, aged 56, returns to New York after 33 years in Europe.

The narrator opens the story very “realistically” with Brydon’s reply to the standard question addressed to visitors: “Every one asks me what I ‘think’ of everything . . .” and he evades the answer by replying that it is “so silly a demand on so big a subject, my ‘thoughts’ would still be almost altogether about something that concerns only myself.”<sup>1</sup> He is talking to a friend of his youth, Alice Staverton, who with sympathy and empathy remains his partner in dialogue throughout the story; it is strongly suggested that she loves him and has waited for him through the years of his absence. Brydon is both impressed and disturbed by the change he observes: “the difference, the newness, the queerness, above all the bignesses . . . assaulted his vision where ever he looked.” There is also a feeling of guilt about this long absence; yet “the swagger things, the modern, the monstrous . . . were exactly his sources of dismay” (726).

Brydon has returned for a purpose: “to look at his ‘property’” (727): two houses, one of which provided the income which enabled him to live in Europe, the other is the house on the Jolly Corner in which he was born and lived through his adolescence, it is his ancestral home “in which various members of his family lived and died” (727). The first one is under

"reconstruction as a tall mass of flats" (727). As he visits it to check on the progress, he discovers to his own astonishment virtues which "had been dormant in his own organism": "a capacity for business and a sense for construction." He finds himself "ready to climb ladders . . . and ready 'to go into' figures," "to walk the plank, to handle materials and look wise about them, to ask questions" (728), even "standing up" to the incompetent representative of the building firm (729).

Alice Staverton, who lived all her life in New York in rather modest circumstances challenges him with the insight "that he had clearly for too many years neglected a real gift. If he had but stayed at home he would have anticipated the inventor of the sky-scraper" (729-30). Something in Brydon is touched off by these words: the image of "some strange figure" in his American home haunts him; it develops in his mind into the action of opening a door to empty rooms until finally meeting "some quite erect confronting presence, sometimes planted in the middle of the place and facing him through the dusk" (730). Brydon has decided not to convert the house at the Jolly Corner for "beastly rent values" (732), he keeps it empty so that it remains in "absolute vacancy," a "great gaunt shell" in which gas and electric light are off. When he meets Alice Staverton he tries to convey to her the mystification he feels about this house. During their talk at this time both have "ghosts" on their mind, at first used metaphorically, then concretely: "Oh Ghosts—of course the place must swarm with them" (734). As it turns out the only ghost to be encountered is "the erect confronting presence" Brydon has anticipated. Consequently Brydon becomes obsessed with the question what life would have made of him had he stayed. "It comes over me that I had then a strange *alter ego* deep down somewhere within me" (736). Yet at the same time he is convinced that this personage which he imagines as monstrous is a "totally other person. But I do want to see him . . . And I can. And I shall" (738).

Thus Spencer Brydon surrenders to the obsession to find, call up, encounter his other hidden, or undeveloped, self. More and more his search develops into a hunt. Part II of *The Jolly Corner* is the story of this hunt, conducted in the ancestral house, and told as an adventure and suspense story in which Brydon "pursues," "stalks" his prey like "any beast of the

forest." He tries to "waylay" his *alter ego*, which he perceives as "walking" in "the house of the past, of that mystical other world that might have flourished for him had he not, for weal or woe, abandoned it" (740). The search thus depends on a mysterious relation between house and self as territory; the house serving as a frame of self and as agency of this hunt.

The Jolly Corner is the story of a special kind of adventure, a ghost hunt which is conducted in Brydon's mind and consciousness in search for the latent qualities within his personality, the stages and result of which are self-produced. What we learn about them is what Brydon as center of consciousness experiences or imagines he experiences. It is therefore proper that the story of this hunt for his other self is told to a large degree in the form of *Erlebte Rede*, "free indirect discourse," a discourse in which the narrator surrenders to the protagonist by moving almost imperceptibly from third person to a blending of third and first person narration. As action and events are largely projections of Brydon's consciousness the story has to be retold by making rather extensive use of his "free indirect discourse."

Brydon conducts the search for his *alter ego* as a ritual of "haunting" the house—in the basic sense of the word, which means to revisit habitually as by a ghost. He sometimes even comes twice, first in the hours of "gathering dust" (769) and late at night between his dinner at the club and the return to the hotel, moving through rooms, vistas of a "mystical other world," up and down staircases, through passages of rooms which are like compartments of his consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Finally he is certain of success: "I've hunted him till he has 'turned.' He's . . . brought at last to bay" (744). "He has been dodging, retreating, hiding, but now worked up to anger, he'll fight" (745) Brydon applauds himself.

The final encounter on the last night of pursuit is brought about by a confusion of identities, that is of the two selves within him. When Brydon revisits the flight of four rooms at the top of the building, the fourth room, which is without exit to the corridor, has its single door closed—while Brydon is certain to have it left open: ". . . why what else was clear but that there had been another agent?" (748). "Ah this time, at last they were . . . the two opposed projections of him, in presence . . ." (749). At this point,

Brydon loses courage. He opens a casement to let the outside night air in and contemplates escaping by an outside ladder to the street, if this were possible. As it is, he has to traverse the house, "making blindly for the greater staircase, to uncontrollably, insanely, fatally take his way to the streets —" (753). In his panic, he reaches the black and white marble squares of the entrance, which several times had reminded him of his childhood. "This was the bottom of the sea," and he feels the "thrill of assured escape" when he discovers that the inner doors of the vestibule are open, which he believes to have closed. Advancing in the feeling "that here was at last something to meet, to touch, to take, to know" (755) which meant either liberation or defeat, in the dim light a figure presents itself: "rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there to measure himself with his own power of dismay" (755). The "dismay" is directed at the apparition which is of his own making, created in and brought forth from his own unconscious. This is what we learn about how Brydon "took him in": while he perceives the ghost's face at first as dim "from the pair of the raised hands that covered it" the figure presents itself to him in a hard and acute light in the

queer actuality of evening dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe. (755)

Actually, we are led to assume, a copy of his own gentlemanly evening appearance. The figure impresses itself on Brydon more intensely than any "portrait by a great modern master." At the same time Brydon's revulsion becomes immense as he "gapes at his other self," at "the splendid covering hands," one of which "had lost two fingers which were reduced to stumps, as if accidentally shot away" (756). When the hands are dropped and the face is left uncovered

Horror, with the sight, had leaped into Brydon's throat, gasping there in sound he couldn't utter; for the bared identity was too hideous as *his*, and his glare was the passion of his protest. (756)

Brydon rejects the apparition he has cornered: "Such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous." He now regards his efforts

as "a grotesque waste" and the "success of his adventure an irony" and he rejects the apparition as a stranger whom he regards as "evil, odious, blatant, vulgar" (756). In other words, Brydon, who from the beginning had expected the American version of his personality as monstrous, now rejects not only the result of his search but his whole effort of self-discovery: "He had been 'sold,' he inwardly moaned, stalking such a game as this." In this shock, the puzzling motif of the missing fingers plays a role as a confirmation of identity,<sup>3</sup> as is underlined "when Brydon winced—whether for [the apparition's] proved identity, or for his lost fingers" (762). "Sick with the force of his shock," he collapses into unconsciousness.

The specter which appears to Brydon is a peculiar kind of ghost: not an unbidden guest from a nether world, but a projection of his psyche, which he has rigorously, methodically, and relentlessly called forth. The interpretations which have been applied to *The Jolly Corner* are various: It has been linked to "the most appalling yet most admirable nightmare" which Henry James has related in *A Small Boy and Others*, of resisting and then pursuing an "awful agent" through the Galerie d'Apollon of the Louvre.<sup>4</sup> Some critics detect influences of Hawthorne, Poe, or Irving.<sup>5</sup> Martha Banta sees self-haunting as a manifestation of inner guilt as the ruling theme in late nineteenth-century fiction and indeed for both Brydon and the author, a sense of guilt for having abandoned their native country serves for a Jamesian "germ" which the story brings to fruition.<sup>6</sup> Daniel J. Schneider recognizes in James's fiction the repeated effort to express a polarization of his psyche in the pattern of the hunter and the hunted.<sup>7</sup> Several critics discuss the relation and the difference to such works as *The Sense of the Past* (1917) and the much earlier story *A Passionate Pilgrim* (1871).<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Hocks links the "literary art" of Henry James to his brother's philosophy,<sup>9</sup> discussing the "quasi-supernatural" realm of the "ghost pieces" (198-99) as a "deeper penetration into human consciousness." He compares *The Jolly Corner* to *The Beast in the Jungle* and links it to William James' proposition of a "subliminal self" (209). There is no reference to the conceptions of the self as developed in William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890) or *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892). Nobody,

as far as I can see, has as yet pointed to these conceptions, as I will in this paper.

It therefore is justified to take account of psychological notions of the time, as well as brother William's psychological research and theories. Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century were fascinated by, involved in, or critically aware of Spiritualism, the belief that the human self after death survives as a spirit which can be contacted in another world. The nature, potentials, and hazards of the self were explored and discussed in the popular arena as well as in the fields of science and literature.

In literature, the age-old *Doppelgänger* motif was revived with the new twists and sophistication in such works as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which presented the human personality as an amalgam of good and evil. Dr. Jekyll, a respected and law-abiding scientist who is troubled by the notion of the "duality of man" concocts a drug which transforms him into an *alter ego* which as "pure evil" commits wanton, wholly unprovoked murder.

Henry James commented critically on Spiritualism and related trends in *The Bostonians* and in a short story "Professor Fargo" he drew the portrait of a charlatan who represented the sinister aspects of the movement, while William James, physician and pioneer psychologist, studied its more serious aspects. He attended séances and discussed the functions and talents of mediums. Various forms of "dual nature" found his attention and left results in his psychological theories. Some spectacular cases of "multiple personality" which occurred in France and America at the time were discussed among psychologists. William James participated in the examination of the case of one Ansel Bourne, who suffered a complete change from one identity to another and back again, a case which recently together with related phenomena received a detailed account by Michael G. Kenny.<sup>10</sup>

In his *Psychology, Briefer Course* of 1892 William James in Chapter XII develops his conception of "The Self" by distinguishing between "The Me and the I."<sup>11</sup> He defines the "I" as "aware of personal existence," while the "me" contains the total self: an empirical self to which belong the

material "me," made up of body, clothes, family, property; the social "me" of fame, honor, social position, and the spiritual "me" which comprises the entire collection of states of consciousness. It is this complex constitution of self which William James links to the phenomena of mutations and multiplications of the self, to all alterations of personality. Since the "me" changes as it grows, identity is only a relative thing, loosely constructed and held together by some common memories. Mutations of the self are therefore possible, of which William James recognizes three types: insane delusions, alternating selves, and mediumships or possessions.

I would like to suggest that for Henry James, who in his long residence abroad had acquired a material, social and spiritual European "me" and had neglected to develop his American self, these thoughts and theories were meaningful and helpful in illustrating the problem which confronted him at his return to a native country that so strikingly had progressed toward modern characteristics of Americanness. And it fits the concepts of this theory that Spencer Brydon tries to acquire the furnishings, the consciousness and missed experience of his American self in the family home, the property in which for him linger the memories of his youth, of the members and social positions of his family. Prowling through the rooms he reads "value"

... into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead; the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented, the annals of three generations ... afloat in the very air like microscopic motes. (733)

All this serves to construct the material, social and spiritual equipment of his American self, which haunts him as the spectral figure of a ghost.

Section III serves as a coda to Brydon's haunting experience. Night has changed to daylight when Brydon wakes up from his swoon, his head cradled in the lap of Alice Staverton, who acting on her intuition has found him on the black and white marble squares of the vestibule. In waking up Brydon has a feeling of having returned in peace from a "prodigious journey" (757). He feels as if he had died and assures Alice that she brought him back to life, a mild suggestion that the ordeal of search, hunt, horror

and swoon are taken as a kind of rebirth. When the memory of the horror of the night returns to him, Alice in a role between lover and motherly counselor becomes a healer of his wounded spirit. She also reveals herself as a loving clairvoyant: from the beginning she has had a comprehension of Brydon's putative American self—she claims to have seen it in her dreams—and now assures him “it's not you. Of course it wasn't to have been” (760). While Brydon is unable to accept “this brute black stranger”—the shock of recognition felt in the confrontation with “the bared identity” (756) remains without results—Alice pities him and feels that she “could have liked him. And to me . . . he was no horror. I had accepted him” (762). She repeats her somewhat ambiguous assurance: “‘And he isn't—no he isn't—*you*’ she murmured as he drew her to his breast” (762)<sup>12</sup> as, of course, he has remained his European self.—At first sight one of the rare happy endings in James's work, but on rather slim evidence. As Brydon rejects the American experience the reader cannot but doubt that he will remain in New York, let alone marry the good Alice, but expects him to return to England at the first opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

When Henry James revisited the United States he found the old family house on Washington Place gone and replaced by a new building. His protagonist Spencer Brydon is more lucky: he finds his ancestral home intact but is also shocked by the state of the country, which has changed from the “jolly” to the “modern” and the “monstrous.” The story thus has a political dimension: Brydon, and presumably James, realize that the change meant a change of how life is lived, and that a participation in this change would have resulted in a transformation of the self, a disturbing thought which actually puts their identity in jeopardy. James fictionalized this anxiety by combining such traditional motifs as ghost and *Doppelgänger* with the latest psychological theories about the self and alternate personality which his brother had developed. In 1905 he returned to England to live there for the rest of his life; in 1915 he became a British citizen. The horrid specter of the alter ego as an evil and odious stranger is Henry James' explanation and, to a certain extent, his justification for his return to England.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quotations are from *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1948) 725.

<sup>2</sup>From the beginning, Brydon located his talents for business and construction in "a compartment of his mind not yet penetrated" (728).

<sup>3</sup>Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1955-58) notes missing fingers under the heading "Identity Tests": H 57.2 "Recognition by missing fingers." S. Gorley Putt, *The Fiction of Henry James: A Reader's Guide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 48 asks whether "this final proof of identity has been spotted as an instance of long-forgotten castration complex?"

<sup>4</sup>*A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribner, 1913) 346-49. Cushing Strout in *Psychohistory Review* (1979) argues against this connection.

<sup>5</sup>As for instance, Walter Shear, "Cultural Fate and Social Freedom in Three American Short Stories," *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (1992): 543-49.

<sup>6</sup>Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972) 134.

<sup>7</sup>Daniel J. Schneider, *The Crystal Cage: Adventures of the Imagination in the Fiction of Henry James* (Lawrence: Regents P of Kansas, 1978) passim.

<sup>8</sup>Deborah Esch, "A Jamesian About-Face: Notes on 'The Jolly Corner,'" *Modern Critical Views: Henry James*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987) 235-50.

<sup>9</sup>Richard A. Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatic Thought: A Study in the Relationship Between the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1974).

<sup>10</sup>Michael G. Kenny, *The Passion of Ansel Bourne: Multiple Personality in American Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 1986)

<sup>11</sup>William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course, The Works of William James*, gen. ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984) 159.

<sup>12</sup>Some critics regard Alice Staverton merely as a sounding board, a dialogue partner who helps Spencer Brydon to understand and solve his problems. She is more than that. Russell J. Reising, "'Doing Good by Stealth': Alice Staverton and Women's Politics in 'The Jolly Corner,'" *The Henry James Review* 13 (1992): 50-66 attributes prime importance to her role in the story and links her to contemporary feminist movements.

<sup>13</sup>I disagree with critics who think (as Leon Edel, *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James* 725) that Brydon is finally reconciled to the "black stranger," his potential American self. When Alice Staverton assures him that "he isn't you" she obviously refers to his actual self.