

Turning the Corner of Interpretation: A Response to Elena Anastasaki*

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He had bought a large map representing
the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when
they found it to be
A map they could all understand.
(Lewis Carroll, "The Hunting of the Snark")

Since the 1960s, Henry James's "The Jolly Corner" has repeatedly inspired critical responses of a particular type: what might be called 'solve the riddle' readings, in which critics try to identify the ambiguously figured ghost Spencer Brydon conjures, stalks, and encounters in his attempt to know "what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and 'turned out,' if he had not so, at the outset, given it up" (James 735).¹ Among other things, the ghost has been identified as the shadow of capitalism, the victim of capitalism, an embodiment of analogy, the effect of prosopopeia, a cuckolded relative, Brydon's hidden biracial self, and his closeted homosexual identity.² Recently, however, the trend has shifted away from naming the ghost and toward interpretations that examine how James structured the narrative. Such readings include Lee Clark Mitchell's analysis of the narrator's use of scare quotes, Lynda Marie Zwinger's study of tense and syntax, and my own reading, which focuses on the story as a rewriting of the Narcissus myth.

Elena Anastasaki's incisive and provocative essay participates in, and usefully extends, this most recent wave of scholarship. Unlike

*Reference: Elena Anastasaki, "Henry James's Double-Bind: Chasing Possibilities in 'The Jolly Corner,'" *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 82-103. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanastasaki01813.htm>>.

Zwinger and Mitchell's detail-oriented approach, which focuses on such specific stylistic features as James's nuanced use of punctuation or tense, Anastasaki's reading investigates the larger process of narrative selection and its inevitable limitations. She sidesteps identifying the ghost by self-consciously shifting her attention away "from the apparition's interpretation" and toward "the process of that construction and to the puzzlement of the unexpected outcome" (86-87). In other words, the story is not really about the ghost, but about the way Brydon creates and perceives the ghost. All that can really be known about the alter ego is that it is a "product of a consciousness that refuses to be fixed" because it "refute[s] its very principle and basic function, that of selection" (87). To elucidate this selective process, she uses a number of wide-ranging analogies, including William James's theory of consciousness, Schrödinger's ideas on quantum law, and Umberto Eco's understanding of the *fabula*. These equivalent theories of paradox, she argues, operate like the story insofar as each attempts to articulate, not the particularities of the object of study, but rather, the structures that make possible the object's appearance. Anastasaki likens this, in turn, to James's approach to fictional possibility as explained in his famous metaphor of the "house of fiction" (*Critical Prefaces* 46). According to her, the completely empty house on the jolly corner "is the 'house of fiction' where nothing is decided yet, since the story is lingering on the threshold (95). Ultimately, then, the story operates as an elliptical parable about the conditions and constraints of narrative construction in the face of the limitless possibilities fiction offers.

Anastasaki's reading, along with Zwinger and Mitchell's, takes a step in the right direction by warily avoiding the temptation to identify a ghost that is so ambiguously figured that it can be all things to all readers. Such interpretations, however, (and I include my own) are ultimately a more subtle version of 'riddle' readings insofar as they reinscribe the ghost at a further remove through abstract analogies. Although these readings do not, properly speaking, 'name' the other ghost, they draw a connection between a feature of the story and an

extratextual idea, and then name the ghost's correlate in that other, parallel world. For Zwinger, an analysis of personal pronouns and indirect discourse eventually gives way to a reading that equates Brydon's encounter with a Kristevan confrontation between the deject and an the abject (i.e., the ghost is *like* the abject) (9). For Mitchell, scare quotes function to underline a clash between Brydon's literal and figurative status (i.e., the ghost is *like* literal meaning) (229). For Anastasaki, the house on the jolly corner is similar to "the house of fiction" in which the writer hunts "Form" (i.e., the ghost is *like* narrative form) (95). In my own essay, despite claiming that my "reading eschews naming the 'other Brydon,'" I nevertheless compare the encounter to the internal drama brought about during the mirror stage (i.e., the ghost is *like* the Lacanian Real) (191).

It appears that "The Jolly Corner" has worked a bit of magic, not unlike Brydon's ability to make a specter appear simply by thinking it into existence. This is not so much magic, however, as a magic *trick* that works by making audiences believe there is a determinate figure to figure out. I would like to suggest, here, that the story is perhaps best understood as a clever narrative machine that generates a specific type of reading by destabilizing the relationship between reference and expression (i.e., between the story and how it gets expressed in the narrative). What I wish to further interrogate, then, is not the ghost or Brydon's perception of it, but rather how the narrative produces the illusion of something that both is and is not there. Rather than trying to identify the *what* of the story, we should perhaps turn our attention to *how* it encodes and ensures these effects. How exactly does James get us to turn the crank (or screw? or corner?) in prose that consistently refuses to "tell"?³

The work "The Jolly Corner" most resembles in terms of the character of its critical reception is *The Turn of the Screw*, to which it is frequently compared. As Shoshana Felman famously pointed out about the latter, interpretations tend to focus solely on whether or not the ghosts the governess sees are real or hallucinations (98). The lengthy debate, as she suggests, may be evidence of the effectiveness of what

James identified in the New York Preface as the novella's "trap": "it is a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught" (xviii). Later, in the New York Preface to the volume containing "The Jolly Corner," James introduces the story in relation to this work, by way of mentioning, again, a "critical challenge":

The apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, in [*The Turn of the Screw*], the elusive presence nightly 'stalked' through the New York house by the poor gentleman in ["The Jolly Corner"], are matters as to which in themselves, really, the critical challenge (essentially nothing ever but the spirit of fine attention) may take a hundred forms—and a hundred felt or possibly proved infirmities is too great a number. Our friends' respective minds about them, on the other hand, are a different matter—challengeable, and repeatedly, if you like, but never challengeable without some consequent further stiffening of the whole texture. Which proposition involves, I think, a moral. The moving accident, the rare conjunction, whatever it be, doesn't make the story [...]; the human emotion and the human attestation, the clustering human conditions we expect presented, only make it. (xx)

In the passage, James suspects (rightly) that the ghosts themselves will engage the critical faculties of readers, but then he directs attention away from the more basic elements of the narrative (the ghosts as characters, events) and toward his characters' perception of these things. In this respect, Anastasaki's interpretation is in line with James's "moral" since she works from the assumption that the "story's center is indisputably the character's consciousness, and the third-person narrator giving the account of Brydon's 'adventure' as he experiences it" (94). At this point in the essay, she briefly focuses on the third-person narrator's aside at the moment when Brydon experiences a "duplication of consciousness":

There came to him, as I say—but determined by an influence beyond my notation!—the acuteness of this certainty; under which however the next moment he had broken into a sweat that he would as little have consented to attribute to fear as he would have dared immediately to act upon it for enterprise. It marked, none the less a prodigious thrill, a thrill that represented sudden dismay, no doubt, but also represented, and with the self-same

throb, the strangest, the most joyous, possibly the next minute almost the proudest, duplication of consciousness. (744-45)

Anastasaki observes that in this passage Brydon “feel[s] the fluid limits of his identity” but that “the narrator admits defeat in not giving a satisfactory account of this experience; and yet, somehow, it is this avowal of impossibility that makes it possible for the reader to grasp such an incongruity” (95). The narrator’s rare intrusion certainly is a textual feature worth noting, but her explanation of how it produces the understanding she records does not advance much further than “somehow.” Her reaction, however, is itself evidence of a reading effect—an awareness that the narration produces an impression through an apparent denial of the possibility of representation.

The “how” of this “somehow” is a species of what Gerald Prince has coined the “unnarratable,” which he defines as that which “cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating” (1). James’s particular use of the unnarratable in this instance belongs to a sub-class which Robyn Warhol terms the “supranarratable,” which “comprises those events that defy narrative, foregrounding the inadequacy of language [...] to achieve full representation” (223). While this type of narration might “foreground” the limits of language, it nonetheless profits from the ostensible admission of inadequacy. As Warhol points out, supranarratable moments can heighten the audience’s sense of the characters’ horror by strategically withholding the magnitude of their experience. The supranarratable is a narrative gesture that does not *not* narrate, but rather works to intensify the effect of an obscured or hidden subject. Anastasaki claims that the narrator’s interjection of “beyond my notation!” refers to Brydon’s “certainty” that he is experiencing a “duplication of consciousness.” Grammatically, at least, this “certainty” refers to Brydon’s feelings about the event James narrates in the sentences leading up to the above-quoted passage. As the first sentence of the paragraph announces, the “certainty more intimate than any he had yet known” is that there is a ghost at the top of the stairs waiting for him (744). That which is “beyond [the narrator’s] notation” is, then, the “influence” that creates his sense of certainty

regarding this fact—not his experience of a duplex consciousness, which comes after he reflects on the implications of this certainty. Given this context, that which is supranarratable is far more supernatural than psychological, because it refers to Brydon's ability to feel the ghost's presence through the extrasensory perception he has been cultivating throughout the second part of the story. As Warhol notes, instances of the unnarratable, in making "explicit the boundaries of the narratable" often "become strategies for moving the boundaries outward" (230). Here, James uses the technique, not to mark the limits of realist representation, but rather to extend its providence. Despite its supernatural subject, the unnarratable heightens the reality effect not only by implicitly corroborating Brydon's experience (the omniscient narrator bears witness to these fantastic events), but also by legitimizing the extrasensory experience by confirming its extrarepresentational status (of course there is no vocabulary to describe a phenomenon that breaks the laws of physical reality).

A narrative technique James uses far more than the supranarratable, however, is "hypothetical focalization," which David Herman defines as "the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue" (231). Much like the unnarratable, hypothetical focalization tends to emerge only occasionally in the course of a realist narrative, but "The Jolly Corner" is rife with examples. This might be expected since Herman's definition practically describes the story's central idea: Brydon continually contemplates what he might have been, and spends the greater part of the narrative trying to adopt "the requisite perspective" that would make finding that out possible. Concentrating on focalization in general, insofar as it "pertains to the elaboration of the narrative as opposed to the substance of the story" (Herman 235), necessarily deemphasizes the "moving accident" that, according to James, "doesn't make the story" and redirects attention to the "respective minds" of the protagonists. Focalization, and hypothetical focalization in particular, can help us

turn another corner in interpreting this tale, getting us from the *what* of the narrative to the *how*, from story to discourse, and from ghost identity to the ghost effect.

James's use of hypothetical focalization in "The Jolly Corner," particularly in the first and second sections, creates a sustained mood of epistemic uncertainty. As Herman explains, the technique makes it particularly difficult to distinguish reference from expression, leading to "indecision over what counts as the actual versus what counts as merely possible worlds built up over the course of a narrative" (232). In the first part of the story, Brydon and Alice Staverson gradually come to entertain the possibility of the alter ego existing in the house. James begins to erode the grounds of certainty by having both the narrator and Brydon posit counterfactual perspectives that destabilize the relationship between reality and possible worlds. For instance, in contemplating the degree to which New York has changed since his thirty-three-year absence, Brydon repeatedly thinks, "It would have taken a century [...] it would have taken a longer absence and a more averted mind than those even of which he had been guilty, to pile up the differences, the newnesses, the queernesses, above all the bignesses, for the better or the worse, that at present assaulted his vision wherever he looked" (726). Here, the hypothetical spectator is someone who over time accumulates strange and unique experiences in Europe with a "more averted mind" than Brydon's. This formulation establishes a series of unconventional quasi-equivalencies: one-hundred years to thirty-three years, a more averted mind in a hypothetical past to Brydon's "present" and immediate perspective, "the differences, the newnesses, the queernesses" in Europe to their counterparts in America. Even at the very outset of the narrative, James obscures the reference world with narration that withholds the original point of departure for the expressed comparisons. Brydon defines himself in relation to a more perceptive hypothetical version of himself, but we can only know how "averted" this other mind might be in relation to Brydon—which is, in turn, only offered in the narrative in relation to a hypothetical other.

Hypothetical focalization appears again with the first instantiation of a ghost in the narrative, although whether or not the ghost exists in the reference world cannot be specifically determined by the narration. As Alice and Brydon discuss the possibility of ghosts existing in the house while touring it, Alice's gaze loses itself, and the narrator remarks: "She might even for the minute, off there in the fine room, have imagined some element dimly gathering. Simplified like the death-mask of a handsome face, it perhaps produced for her just then an effect akin to the stir of an expression in the 'set' commemorative plaster" (734). The narrator posits a hypothetical Alice who "might" imagine something manifesting itself—something that "perhaps" would make that Alice (who may or may not exist in the reference world) see something "like" a death-mask, and creating something "akin" to the effect felt *if* she saw a face in the plaster. The passage operates like a condensed version of Brydon's trajectory in the second part of the story, in which he imagines the possibility of making "baffled forsworn possibilities" take "Form," sees the ghost and experiences a shock. In fact, Brydon sees the ghost's face against a wall in the front hall—the very same room in which Alice may or may not have seen something (754). Nonetheless, that which might seem to foreshadow the later event is at best a site on shifting ground: we do not know if Alice saw anything, but even if we assume she did, we can only "perhaps" know its possible effect on her through a comparison to something we have no reason to assume happened.

In part two, when the story progresses from conceiving of the possibility of the ghost's existence to Brydon's actual attempt to discover it, the use of this type of focalization increases dramatically.⁴ Whereas the technique formerly served to destabilize the relationship between reference and expression more generally, in the second section, it initially works to destabilize the boundaries between the 'real' and other Brydon, and then to counterfactualize the perspective of a hypothetical observer viewing Brydon. To begin with the first of these effects, in the first half of the second section the narrator repeatedly focalizes the narrative through Brydon's perception of a conditionally

existing virtual self. For instance, the narrator observes that each time he enters the house at night, he experiences the sound of the steel tip of his cane as “the dim reverberating tinkle as of some far-off bell hung who should say where?—in the depths of 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). Unlike the mysterious “someone” with the “more averted mind,” the hypothetical spectator is, for the first time, another Brydon who “might” have experienced a “mystical other world.” The focalization functions not only to duplicate, but also to merge the possible perspectives of the actual and imaginatively posited character at the level of discourse, since the ambiguous use of the possessive “him” applies equally to the other Brydon and the Brydon who muses on possessing the experiences of the other (i.e., “flourished for him,” the other self; or, “flourished for *him*,” the self who thinks). This creates a perspective that is both doubled and blurred, compassing possibilities that are simultaneously effaced.

Hypothetical focalization also importantly appears just before the key passage about Brydon “turning the tables” on the ghost (742). James alludes to this in his notebooks, claiming that the “most intimate idea of [“The Jolly Corner”] is that my hero’s adventure there takes the form so to speak of his turning the tables, as I think I called it, on a ‘ghost’ or whatever, a visiting or haunting apparition otherwise qualified to appal *him*; and thereby winning a sort of victory by the appearance, and the evidence, that this personage or presence was more overwhelmingly affected by him than he by *it*” (*Complete Notebooks* 507). The significance of the statement lies not only in the fact that James again practically dismisses the importance of the “‘ghost’ or whatever,” but also in how he pinpoints the shift in power between the two agents as the essential part of the story—the idea around which everything else must “turn.” Curiously, however, where the phrase appears in the story itself, James undercuts the power of this impression on Brydon: “People enough, first and last, had been in terror of apparitions, but who had ever before so turned the tables and

become himself, in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror? He might have found this sublime had he quite dared to think of it; but he didn't too much insist, truly, on that side of his privilege" (742). The other identity projected through hypothetical focalization in this case is a more daring version of the Brydon in the reference world, one who "might" be able to embrace the beauty and fear of James's theme. The narration again reveals Brydon to the reader only in relation to a hypothetical version of himself established by the narrator: we only know that he is less daring than a version of him who would have acted and, perhaps, felt differently. In a sense, the narrator does what Brydon does at the very same point in the story: project a double consciousness through the "shifting effects of perspective" (742).

From this point on in the second section, few events occur besides Brydon finding a mysteriously closed door and the concluding direct encounter with the ghost. Almost everything else that 'happens' happens entirely in Brydon's mind, including his growing awareness of the impression he produces on entities not immediately present. Because James never shifts away from Brydon's point of view, he is in the peculiar position of having to depict "turning the tables" without actually turning the narrative perspective. The narrator represents Brydon's preternatural experience of being seen by something unseen through the use of hypothetical focalization at two levels: first, as before, with the use of virtual spectators, and second, by counterfactualizing the perspective of the hypothetical witness observing him. For instance, as he acquires the ability to "visually project" himself, Brydon finds that it "made him feel, this acquired faculty, like some monstrous stealthy cat: he wondered if he would have glared at these moments with large shining yellow eyes, and what it mightn't verily be, for the poor hard-pressed *alter ego*, to be confronted with such a type" (742). In the expressed world of the narrative Brydon sees his own eyes through the eyes of an assumed presence, appearing to himself only in relation to a position he has provisionally constructed.⁵ From this point on, Brydon's self-awareness of being seen by an absent witness appears with increased frequency.⁶ In this

aporetic dreamscape, Brydon's consciousness emerges in relation to something that may or may not be there, but regardless of the ontological status of that 'something,' its hypothetical existence in the reference world of the narrative becomes temporarily constitutive of his identity.

Ultimately, hypothetical focalization functions in the tale to create the effect that something identifiable must exist in the reference world because the entire narrative, both thematically and structurally, positions itself in relation to an assumed presence. In other words, James positions the reference world in such a way that access to it through the expressed world of the narrative is ambiguous and elusive. The narration unfolds a world that seems, not unlike the very concept of a ghost itself, that which is both there and not there—or rather, what might or might not be there. Examining narrative technique allows us to see exactly *how* James tempts the reader to assume a position in which certain possibilities become visible while simultaneously undermining the basis for adopting such a position.

Anastasaki's favoured analogy for "The Jolly Corner" is Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment about quantum law, in which a metaphoric cat in a sealed box is both dead and alive until the box is opened, collapsing a possible duality into the fixed reality of the observer's perspective. It is an apt analogy and well describes the tension of knowing and not-knowing that Brydon's own suspended consciousness experiences in the second section of the tale. What it nevertheless fails to explain is why readers and critics keep opening the box to fix the ghost. In response to this, I would like to offer a far less elegant metaphor: the design of the slot machine. Slot machines use random number generators to determine whether or not a given play will win. This means that from a practical standpoint, such machines only require a single button to make the play and some way of indicating whether or not the play is successful. In terms of design, however, they are elaborately decorated, crammed with blinking lights, turning wheels, and blaring sirens. The machines are so constructed to exploit the brain's tendency to locate patterns and predict

rewards in apparent systems, even if those systems have a non-determinate element (Lehrer 59-61). Although the rational gambler may know that there is no way to predict a win, the barrage of pattern-making elements that ceaselessly flash, whistle, and spin, function to constantly signify a possible answer.

In a far more sophisticated way, “The Jolly Corner” uses narrative devices that create the sense of a pattern that seems to lead to a determinate meaning. Supranarratable moments and hypothetical focalization are only two among many strategies: there is also the repeated use of the number three (Brydon’s thirty-three year absence, three sections to the story, the three rooms leading to the closed door), related doubles (two properties, two countries, two Brydons), echoing adjectives, and the suggestive identifying qualities of the ghost (the pince-nez, unusual evening attire, and two missing fingers). Everything appears to point to some overwhelming solution, but the real fascination of the story is in how we are tempted to see, yet prevented from seeing clearly. As Alice Staverson points out, Brydon could not “know himself” (760). For Alice, this is a condition of life, for Anastasaki, it is a condition of contemplating fictional possibilities—but at yet another level, past self-knowledge and signification, it is a condition created by, and encoded in, narrative discourse. Although there may not be a payoff for trying one’s luck at identifying the ghost, it is a credit to the author that the house always wins.

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NOTES

¹As one critic puts it, there is “virtually unanimous agreement on the importance (if not the specific signification) of [the] alter ego” (Rashkin 69).

²See, respectively, Benert, Nixon, Flesch, Esch, Rashkin, Hawkins, and Savoy.

³I allude to Douglas’s comment regarding the governess’s tale in *The Turn of the Screw*: “The story *won’t* tell [...] not in any literal, vulgar way” (151).

⁴I count four unambiguous instances in part I, seven in part II, and only two in part III. The frequency fits with the narrative progression insofar as the story

moves from gradually conceiving of an alter ego, to hunting and encountering the double self, to abandoning that pursuit as futile.

⁵Here, the layering of hypothetical frames calls into question not only the relationship between reference and expression, but also the relationship between realism and fantasy. The technique represents a doubling of consciousness as utterly otherworldly while maintaining a foothold in realism—a hallmark, perhaps, of what makes a ghost story frightening. That is, if a story featuring a ghost were completely fantastic, the frame of reference would so dramatically shift that fear of an encroaching unknown would dissolve insofar as the frame of reference would render the fantastic commonplace in the fictional world. That is, if that which in reality is extraordinary becomes typical in the fictional world, it ceases, in that world, to be fantastic or frightening. In this sense, the ghost story is a genre necessarily, or parasitically, rooted in realism because it depends on the assumption of mimetic representation to achieve its desired effect.

⁶For example, when Brydon looks over the rail of a staircase, he becomes “aware that he might, for a spectator, have figured some solemn simpleton playing at hide-and seek” (743), and later, when he leans out a window, he “was not sure that if the patrol had come into sight he mightn’t have felt the impulse to get into relation with it, to hail it, on some pretext, from his fourth floor” (751).

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