

## Henry James's Double-Bind: Chasing Possibilities in "The Jolly Corner"\*

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*Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been;  
I'm also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell;  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The House of Life"*

"If I were to live my life over again, I would be an American"<sup>1</sup>; Henry James's powerful statement is more than just a witty phrase. The subject of alternative lives fascinated him throughout his long career and he tackled it repeatedly in his work to various degrees. But it becomes the central theme in "The Jolly Corner" (1908), a strange tale about a man who decides to go after a rather unusual type of *doppelgänger*: the self he would have been if he had stayed in his American hometown. As we shall see, this narration of a 'road not taken' aspires to materialize the 'might-have-been.' Just like the text, which becomes a means to actually 'take' the road not taken, the story it is presenting and promoting is the life not lived.

The American expatriate Spencer Brydon comes back to his native land after an absence of thirty-three years, to take care of his inherited property which consists of two houses. The story takes its name from the family house which is the scene where the pursuit and the final encounter with his *alter ego* will take place. Significantly positioned at a corner—a place where roads meet—a strange relic of the past amidst modern constructions, it is a place where three generations are overlapping, a spot where time is a-continuous, and therefore parallel lives

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\*Reference: For a related article see Edward Lobb, "The Family Reunion: Eliot, James, and the Buried Life," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 104-22.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanastasaki01813.htm>>.

can exist. The house, seen also as a representation of the mind, "becomes the space where time unfolds simultaneously in differing yet mutually inclusive timeframes" (Waters 181). This *limbo*, both external and internal, is necessary; for the narration of a 'road not taken' is not going to rely on hypothetical *what ifs*, half-truths, or dreams.

The family house plays a significant role in James's conception of identity as a part of one's self. When, in visiting New York, he became painfully aware of the loss of his own birthhouse, he described this effect as "of having been amputated of half my history."<sup>2</sup> William James, Henry's brother and eminent psychologist, viewed one's Self as "*the sum total of all that he CAN call his*,"<sup>3</sup> including his house. Henry echoes these views in *The Portrait of a Lady* where the difference of the European and the American way of perceiving one's identity is exposed through the dialogue of Madame Merle and Isabel Archer, with the fine European perception including the "shell," that is "the whole envelope of circumstances" and "everything that belongs to us," and the American viewing all possessions as "a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one" (*The Portrait of a Lady* 187)

Coming back to the place "in which he had first seen the light,"<sup>4</sup> Brydon's European personality appropriates the house and everything it represents as part of his own identity and wishes to take possession of what he has "given up" of himself by leaving. Back to 'square one' of his life, so to speak, represented by his birthhouse, and having witnessed the incredible changes that have taken place in his native land, he becomes obsessed with "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" (406).

The thought of course has occurred to him before, but what strikes him and triggers a whole new stream of thought is the realization of the "incalculability" (397) of his hypotheses, for even though "he *had* supposed himself, from decade to decade, to be allowing, and in the most liberal and intelligent manner, for brilliancy of change. He actually saw that he had allowed for nothing; he missed what he would have been sure of finding, he found what he would never have imag-

ined" (397). Such conditions, he muses, would necessarily have "made something out of me as well. Only I can't make out what"<sup>5</sup> (406). His search of the "fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of [his] own nature" (407) takes in his mind the figure of an *alter ego* haunting the ancestral house.

Thus starts Brydon's extraordinary adventure of consciousness which will end with the final appalling confrontation of the figure to which he has given substance. Once he has set his mind to this tracking of his other self, his social, 'real' life seems like a shadow as he projects himself in thought into "the other, the real, the waiting life" (411). James's vision of reality is very close to the theories of his brother William, "founded upon the primacy of sensations and mental entities over material realities" (Adams 60). According to William "[t]hought and actuality are made of one and the same stuff, the stuff of experience in general."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Henry James took consciousness as his subject matter viewed as an all encompassing faculty which "contained the world, and could handle and criticise it, could play with it and deride it" ("Life After Death" 123). Reality being a matter of "selection" from experience, and consciousness being the selective agent, Brydon's "hunt" becomes much more real to him than his ordinary life, while at the same time it is reshaping his consciousness. In his preface of *The American* for the New York edition of his collected works, James defines the real as "the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another" (*Critical Prefaces* 31),<sup>7</sup> and the figure Brydon encounters at the end of the tale, however appalling, is real at least in that sense, because it is what he has made of himself through his experience and the creative faculty of his consciousness.

His first notice of a "dormant" quality "in a compartment of his mind never yet penetrated" (399) which might have developed had he stayed in America is "a capacity for business and a sense for construction" (399). The *alter ego* is 'built' firstly on the basis of a series of differences of national identity. However, what is more important to note is this "sense for construction" since it is with this faculty, trans-

posed in the vicinity of consciousness, that Brydon is indeed constructing his *alter ego*. What Brydon *has* then become, is the figurative version—what Lee Clark Mitchell calls “the scare quotes of a life”<sup>8</sup>—of the self he would have become in plain, uncomplicated America, a feature of his native land that James held in contempt.<sup>9</sup> Deborah Esch has beautifully shown “the character’s literalizing compulsion” throughout his narrative in his attempt for the “meaning to become one—and only one” (Esch 597). Indeed, that is the only way to make the might-have-been ‘real,’ since the slightest ambiguity gives rise to doubts and banishes the construct of Brydon’s *alter ego* to the realm of the imagination. The character’s obsession for a single meaning, as we shall see, comes in contrast with the narrative’s openness to alternative possibilities, giving it the balance necessary for the story’s coherence to hold.

Brydon’s *alter ego* has—as is to be expected—been given many interpretations varying in accordance to the angle the story has been viewed. As Shalyn Claggett has pointed out, “however many ‘Brydons’ there are in the story, criticism has made them legion” (Claggett 199n4). The interpretation that had prevailed for a long time was the one that saw the apparition as the “monstrous American” that Brydon would have become if his long stay in Europe had not saved him. This view has been supported by a number of James’s critics such as Peter Brooks, F. O. Matthiessen, Edmund Wilson, Leon Edel, F. W. Dupee, and Marius Bewley, with this last critic qualifying the story as “anti-American with a vengeance.”<sup>10</sup> With Floyd Stovall the national identity gives way to a more personal introspection as he sees the story as being about the hero confronting himself “as he actually is,” finally seeing himself “as he has lived during his European years,” and he contends that “[t]here is nothing in this situation to justify the conclusion that Brydon either rejected America or was reconciled to a formerly rejected America” (Stovall 77, 80, and 83). The story has since been discussed under a variety of prisms focusing on self-knowledge and Brydon’s double has been interpreted as “the male collective shadow of American capitalism, Brydon’s economic self, an embodi-

ment of analogy, Brydon's worst self, and Brydon as a closeted homosexual"<sup>11</sup>; it has also been seen as "much more identifiable, much more real than Brydon."<sup>12</sup> A particularly interesting approach is Deborah Esch's aforementioned view that Brydon creates the apparition through *prosopopoeia*, which "designates the figure that makes present to the senses something abstract" and gives a face to it (594). Along a similar line Lee Clark Mitchell locates the

true crisis of the story [in] Brydon's failure to recognize his own figurative status, even as his self-conscious generating of figurative from literal has spurred on the ghost he cannot face. (230)

Capitalism comes again under a new light in Nicola Nixon's interpretation based on the idea that "money behaves culturally the way metaphor behaves linguistically" (Nixon 813-14); Nixon sees the alter ego as

connotatively a casualty of capitalism, his engagement with ferocious money-making literally inscribed on his face the way that both William James and Norris's Presley longed for it to be on the faces of Rockefeller and Shelgrim. (819)

Shalyn Claggett's original approach posits the Narcissus myth as a key to interpreting the story with the myth functioning "as an allegory of the conditions of self-knowledge," noting that the story might have implications for fictionality itself (197).<sup>13</sup> Finally, Linda Zwinger has read the story through Kristeva's notion of abjection experienced when an Other has "settled in place and stead of what will be 'me,'"<sup>14</sup> stating that

Brydon can deny that "that face" is his face, can refuse the figure to which he has given face (his *prosopopoeia* materializes this presence), but he cannot himself face the possibility that this figure in fact conjures *him*; the face that is *not me* is what makes my acknowledged face mine. (9)

However, if we see Brydon's *alter ego* as a construct of his consciousness, the interest shifts from the apparition's interpretation to

the process of that construction and to the puzzlement of the unexpected outcome that seems to be so radically alien as to appall him.

For William James, personality is based on selection:

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone [...] by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, [...] by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff.<sup>15</sup>

By considering all the possibilities without being able to set his mind on one, Brydon refuses to select. Speculation does indeed allow for multiple realities and Brydon's case strongly resembles Schrödinger's cat, the thought experiment about the cat in a box considered both dead and alive according to quantum law, in a superposition of states, until we, the observer, look inside, thus affecting the outcome and cutting the ties that bind alternative realities together.<sup>16</sup>

For his consciousness, the path once thought of is by the same means also taken, since its life is pure thought fed by experience and, according to James, "[t]he power to guess the unseen [...], to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, [...] may almost be said to constitute experience."<sup>17</sup> This "monstrous" self is then the product of a consciousness that refuses to be fixed, to be pinned down, by refuting its very principle and basic function, that of selection. However, this overwhelming inclusion can lead to annihilation, and that is why Brydon flees before the prospect of the encounter and loses consciousness at the sight of his *alter ego*. The apparition, "unknown, inconceivable, awful, disconnected from any possibility" (427), appalls him in the measure it baffles him; it reduces the range of his mental faculties and uncovers the limitations of his mind to follow the untaken path. Admitting that "[s]uch an identity fitted his at *no point*" (427), he is accepting that at no point had he anticipated that outcome and confirms that the divergence has become so great as to annihilate his personality. Having trodden the untaken path(s) and not been able to decide upon the outcome—"What would it have made of me? What would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know!" (406)—he hoped



that the apparition would give him a fixed point from which he could go even further; instead the journey ends abruptly with the realization of his having reached a dead end as he gazes in the face of his *alter ego* at “his own void [...] in front of the total absence of centre, of reference, of values” (Montandon 38),<sup>18</sup> feeling the “aggression as of infinite numbers of modes of being” (“Life After Death” 124). James refers with the same violence of vocabulary to the “assault of the boundlessly multiplied personal relation (my own), which carries me beyond even the ‘profoundest’ observation of this world whatever, and any mortal adventure, and refers me to realizations I am condemned as yet but to dream of” (“Life After Death” 124). The construct of this monstrous self thus corresponds to the “awful architectural hare” his genius would have discovered, according to Alice, if he had stayed.

In his construction of his *alter ego*, Brydon is confronted with the same problems that are faced by the author in his construction of the story. Consciousness, which was always James’s subject, was in itself an inexhaustible source in need of constant checking. The mapping of a consciousness which aspired to expand itself in its endless possibilities of being could be overwhelming. James, realizing the vastness of the subject after having abandoned *The Sense of the Past*, a novel dealing with a similar idea, when it proved “in execution so damnable difficult and so complex,”<sup>19</sup> chose the form of the short story to keep it manageable. Brydon’s house was to be not only the field of his character’s consciousness, but also James’s “house of fiction,”<sup>20</sup> meant to contain the infinite and the formless in a limited and well-shaped form. The imagery of the house for the description of the structure of fiction is recurrent in James. Apart from the well known quote on the “house of fiction” in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James uses it also in his talk, “The Lesson of Balzac,” to describe the rich and infinite intricacies of the French author’s work that he so much admired: “Balzac’s luxury, as I call it, was in the extraordinary number and length of his radiating and ramifying corridors—the labyrinth in which he finally lost himself” (*The Question of Our Speech* 85). In a

preface he wrote the same year "The Jolly Corner" was published, James is also linking the subject of that tale with the writer's adventure as he speaks about

the obscure law under which certain of a novelist's characters, more or less honourably buried, revive for him by a force or a whim of their own and 'walk' round his house of art like haunting ghosts, feeling for the old doors they knew, fumbling at stiff latches and pressing their pale faces, in the outer dark, to lighted windows. (*Critical Prefaces* 73)

The imagery of the hunt which is largely employed in "The Jolly Corner"<sup>21</sup> also allows us to read Brydon's adventure as an analogy to James's working process. Once James had "captured" his theme he had to confront "the law [of] consciousness [which] gives us immensities and imaginabilities wherever we direct it" ("Life After Death" 123). In his preface to *The Ambassadors*, he asserts "the felicity, or at least the equilibrium, of the artist's state dwells less, surely, in the further delightful complications he can smuggle in than in those he succeeds in keeping out" (*Critical Prefaces* 312). The job is then to "ki[ck] out of the path" the "wayside traps" (*Critical Prefaces* 320) that are lurking. For James it is a double edged knife:

The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. (*The Art of Fiction*)

It is art that serves to give order, coherence and meaning to the muddle of life. For James, the contribution of art to life is thus a matter of interpretation and of evaluation.<sup>22</sup>

According to Umberto Eco, the *fabula* is structured as a process of choosing among alternative courses or possibilities of actualization,<sup>23</sup> and James asserts that "[a]rt is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive" (*The Art of Fiction*). Millicent Bell has shown how Henry James "deliberately promotes impressionism in the *reader*, encourages the *reader's* passive acceptance of the immediate, the temporary, and the suspension of the *reader's*



drive toward a conclusion" with plots which "as they proceed [...] tend to preserve the sense of alternative possibilities" (Bell 8 and 22). Of course, any fictional world, being analogous to the actual one, "contains 'an actual world' and a set of possibilities, alternatives, predictions and forecasts non-actualized in the fictional world" (Ronen 29). The challenge for James, however, in this story was how to tackle such an elusive and virtually infinite subject of actualizing the non-actualized at the expense of the fictional 'actual' world without ignoring the artist's first duty of being "as complete as possible" (*The Art of Fiction*); at the same time excluding all the "waste" and have nothing "wasted"—James insists on the term repeatedly. During his childhood, his father instilled in him the notion that nothing in experience need be wasted.<sup>24</sup> He acknowledges to life the production of "nothing but splendid waste" (*Critical Prefaces* 120) remedied by "the sublime economy of art" (*Critical Prefaces* 120), and his one advice to a young writer is: "'Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!'" (*The Art of Fiction*).

Indeed, any kind of limits, of foreshortening, is either undermining the theme or is subverted by it, dangerously inclining towards looseness, and "[l]ooseness of any description, whether of conception or of execution, [James] hated contemptuously."<sup>25</sup> However, in this instance, the subject itself was so elusive that the only thing left to cling to was to take as his tale's solid material the consistency with which Brydon excludes nothing. Brydon is exactly that sort of person on whom nothing is lost and the only limitation James allows himself in telling his story is his character's 'all inclusive' consciousness.<sup>26</sup> It is this consciousness that Brydon is willingly expanding through patient cultivation; the idea of his American *alter ego*, we are told, he "had felt it as above all open to cultivation" (414). This notion comes again and again in James's writings when he talks about consciousness; it is, according to James, the characteristic of the true artist and his inexhaustible source. In a letter to Henry Adams he notes:

I still find my consciousness interesting—under *cultivation* of the interest [...] *Why* mine yields an interest I don't know that I can tell you ... It's, I suppose,

because I am that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility.<sup>27</sup>

Brydon has that artistic quality of a hyperactive consciousness and the interest to cultivate it; viewed in this light, the monstrous *alter ego* he conjures and James's "queer monster" that is the artist are one and the same, similarly monstrous due to an unusual overgrowth. For both character and author,

It is not really a question of belief [...] but of desire so confirmed, so thoroughly established and nourished, as to leave belief as a comparatively irrelevant affair.<sup>28</sup>

Consciousness is then an ever-growing entity which "the more one turn[s] it, as an easy reflector, here and there and everywhere over the immensity of things, the more it appear[s] to take" (123).

There are also other hints linking Brydon's "hunt" to the writer's creative process. There is of course the constant play between literal and figurative meaning that runs throughout the story, posing, as Deborah Esch notes, the "ordeal of consciousness" as a "function of the process of figuration that it thematizes—of the ordeal, that is, of reading and writing" (588). There is also that strange nightmare, the "most appalling yet the most admirable nightmare of my life,"<sup>29</sup> as James called it, where, in encountering a frightening apparition of a man in the Galerie d'Appolon in the Louvre,<sup>30</sup> he manages to "turn the tables on him" and make him flee. The same expression of "turning the tables on a 'ghost'" is also used in both the tale<sup>31</sup> and James's account of it in his *Notebooks*.<sup>32</sup> This sudden aggressive movement of turning that Brydon executes "as if he might so catch in his face at least the stirred air of some other quick revolution" (415), is an attempt similarly futile as to try to be quicker than one's shadow, and we also find it, in a figurative way, in William James when he is trying to express the effort of the mind to catch a glimpse of its spiritual element: "*Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel is some bodily process, for the most part taking place*

*within the head*" (300). William goes on to assert that "it may be truly said that [...] *the 'Self of selves,' when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat*" (301); so this turning about face turns out to be all about trying to get a glimpse of the "Self of selves."

Although at first this "turning the tables" in the tale seems to be, as James notes, a sign of Brydon's "winning a sort of a victory" over the ghost who is "more overwhelmingly affected by him than he by *it*,"<sup>33</sup> it actually strengthens the ghost's presence by refocusing the point of view of the story, albeit momentarily, from Brydon's consciousness to the ghost's, endowing the ghostly apparition with a consciousness possessing the attributes of a logical being. If the ghost has a consciousness, the ghost has a narrative; and this turning of the tables mirrors the promotion of the non-actualized to the central place of the tale.

James admits to having been all his life "trying to take the measure of my consciousness" ("Life after Death" 122) and as a consequence have "live[d] in it more" ("Life after Death" 123). As he cultivates it, he feels it expand, and this "accumulation of the very treasure [...] of consciousness" is measured in the "enormous multiplication of our possible relations with [the universe]" ("Life after Death" 123). These relations cannot, of course, all actualize, but through art they can offer that kind of expansion to the consciousness. Even as a reader James emphasized that he chose works "most different from my own [...] precisely *for* the extension of life, which is the novel's best gift."<sup>34</sup> It is this expansion of consciousness, these infinite possible relations, that Brydon seeks in his hunt for his might-have-been self in an attempt to complete his image of himself.

In William James's words, "*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind*" (294). At the end of "The Jolly Corner" it is made clear that this alter ego that Brydon confronts is, in many respects, Alice's image of who he might have been:

my mind, my imagination, has worked so over what you might, what you mightn't have been—to show you, you see, how I've thought of you. In the midst of that you came to me—that my wonder might be answered. (432)

The image of the apparition is unrecognizable not only because it is so much different from himself as he is, but also because it entails this vision of Alice.<sup>35</sup> The antagonistic and aggressive relation that Brydon develops with his *alter ego* is then also an attempt to assert his ground: he is to assimilate it as a possibility, not to merge with it; he clearly intends to safeguard his identity as he perceives it.

The apparition is, above all, "too hideous as *his*" (427).

The face, *that* face, Spencer Brydon's?—he searched it still, but looking away from it in dismay and denial, falling straight from his height of sublimity. It was unknown, inconceivable, awful, disconnected from any possibility—! He had been 'sold,' he inwardly moaned, stalking such a game as this [.] (427)

This reaction could be viewed as an exaggerated version of Henry James's aversion to images of himself, especially of photographs. What disturbed James, who declared himself "terribly unphotographable,"<sup>36</sup> was the "apparent evacuation of consciousness"<sup>37</sup> in them. In the same way, Brydon, seeing himself—or a part of himself—from the 'outside,' as a stranger, reduced to a mere image, rebels against this image of the self and refuses to be pinned down and fixed to that alternative. The materialization of the *alter ego* so longingly pursued proves itself treacherous, just like the "mechanical document"<sup>38</sup> that is photography, and Brydon feels 'sold.' For, as long as there was no fixed image, Brydon's *alter ego* could enjoy the richness of all the possibilities laid upon it by Brydon's consciousness. This enriched and ever evolving consciousness is what the tale strives to give shape to, not without some frustration caused by the near impossibility of the attempt. Indeed this same sense of betrayal was felt by the author when he abandoned *The Sense of the Past*, finding himself engaged in "a subject that one can't possibly treat, or hope, or begin, to treat, in the space, and that can only betray one, as regards that, after one is expensively launched" (*Complete Notebooks* 189).

As a writer, James was gratefully aware of “an immense increase—a kind of revelation—of freedom” (*The Art of Fiction*) due to art’s ability to be all comprehensive. Once he had grasped a single character, James’s difficulty was to decide the former’s fate, “*which*, among the possibilities being precisely the question” (*Critical Prefaces* 47). In one of his prefaces he mentions

the author’s incorrigible taste for gradations and superpositions of effect; [...] that contributes to a view of *all* the dimensions. Addicted to seeing ‘through’—one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through *that*—he takes, too greedily perhaps, on any errand, as many things as possible by the way. (153-54)

This is precisely how Brydon goes about in pursuit of his *alter ego* in a tale where the challenge for James lies in enclosing into a confined space and shape this process of infinite branching of the paths not taken which constantly tempt author and character alike. The choice of a single path not taken would indeed not be a solution since, in a work of fiction, it would be just as arbitrary as the one taken. James was of course aware of the inherent danger of this attempt. In his talk on Balzac he mentions how the relations in his work are at moments “multiplied almost to madness” (“The Lesson of Balzac” 85); in his prefaces he talks of “the method at the heart of madness” wondering “where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation?” (*Critical Prefaces* 120) and confessing his “mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one” which would cheat his subject of “its indispensable centre” (*Critical Prefaces* 83-84).

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. Most of the time, quite discretely, the author merges his own voice with the consciousness of his central character (Vaid 238). However, quite aptly, the authorial “I” distances itself in the scene where Brydon experiences a “duplication of consciousness” (416), rejoicing proudly in the fear his *alter ego* can provoke in him:

there came to him, as I say—but determined by an influence beyond my notation!—the acuteness of this certainty; [...] a thrill that represented sudden

dismay, no doubt, but also represented, and with the selfsame throb, the strangest, the most joyous, possibly the next minute almost the proudest, duplication of consciousness. (415-16)

In his fear Brydon is left alone to feel the fluid limits of his identity respond to those of his other self. The ground is so novel, and at the same time so slippery, 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.

As Brydon's strategy within the house of the Jolly corner is "to keep vistas clear" (419), both literally and figuratively, in order to enable the construction of his might-have-been self, so James's narrative structure puts into play what Umberto Eco describes as "the totality of knowledge a narrative text activates" (Ronen 173). The empty house, "the great gaunt shell" where "absolute vacancy reign[s]" (402), is the "house of fiction" where nothing is decided yet, since the story is lingering on the threshold, not taking any paths, or rather taking them all simultaneously by keeping them on par with each other. The narrative is thus not presenting Brydon's life in Europe as a more privileged state of being than the one he would have had by dismissing it in a few vague phrases<sup>39</sup> and concentrating on the non-actualized possibilities of his character. These possibilities preoccupy him to such an extent that they materialize first in narrative and then in the figure of the *alter ego*, which the narrator tellingly calls "the Form."

The closed door that Brydon is confronted with on his last visit to the house signifies the end of these opening vistas in the house of fiction; the alternative possibilities have been condensed into one alternative Form that will confront Brydon's actuality with "a rage of personality before which his own collapsed" (427-28), so that his triumph is also his fall, just as the triumph of the story—materializing the might-have-been—is at the same time its narrative collapse. Indeed this "open vistas" policy could not be sustained for long before the work would become shapeless and meaningless. The choice of a different ending was a well known practice and often a demand of



either publisher or public—James himself had often been asked for a “happy ending” during his painful trials to establish himself as a playwright. However, alternative paths taken within the narrative instead of the one the frame supported was a difficult challenge to meet while maintaining the tight structure of a short story. The main body of the narrative necessarily concerns a time of suspension of the numerous possibilities that linger for a while in this a-chronic space and are therefore, for the sake of structure, eventually dramatized in a single Form. Indeed, once we look into the box, coming back to Schrödinger’s thought experiment, the cat is no longer *both* dead and alive. James was well aware of this double-bind: in order to achieve his goal he had to undermine the very thing he was trying to achieve. He hints at this in his preface to the volume of the New York edition containing “The Jolly Corner,” mentioning that the elusive presence which ‘stalked’ through the New York house by “the poor gentleman” is a matter carrying in itself a critical challenge that “may take a hundred forms—and a hundred felt or possibly proved infirmities is too great a number” (*Critical Prefaces* 257).

Brydon, at the beginning of the tale, expresses his obsession with his self as he might have been with a powerful image of “opening a door [...] into a room shuttered and void” and finding a presence.<sup>40</sup> The door has been part of the germ of the story since the very beginning. In 1879, James wrote “Imagine a door—either walled-up, or that has been long locked—at which there is an occasional knocking,”<sup>41</sup> and again twenty years later:

Note the idea of the knock at the door [...] (... He opens; there *is* some one—natural and ordinary. It is my *entrée en matière*). The denouement is all. What *does* come—at last? What *is* there? This is to be ciphered out.<sup>42</sup>

The confrontation with the apparition, or at least its interpretation, was in the end to become in itself the “denouement” of the story. For Brydon, looking for completeness and unity, wants to see his alternative in a single materialized form, while James is determined to make him see—what he himself has gained out of this perilous adventure—

namely that there is no unity in the might-have-been; it cannot be fixed, not even in fiction. Its beauty and its most exasperating feature is its "incalculability," its incommunicability. The best he can do is to make him stare at a monstrous formless synthesis which is not, however, the sum of its parts, since they cannot coexist in any single form. Once you look, the cat is no longer both dead and alive, the magic of the tale is lost, but if you don't look there is no tale.

Regaining consciousness after the encounter, Brydon has returned "from further away than any man but himself had ever travelled" (428). He has momentarily ventured outside the "tin mould" of life where, in Strether's words in *The Ambassadors*, "a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured" (218). What James's "poor gentleman [has] attempted and suffered in the New York house" (*Critical Prefaces* 258) is what James has suffered and attempted—an attempt doomed to failure but all the more alluring for it—in his house of fiction; and he has, like his character, come back from further away than any man has travelled. But neither of them has come back empty handed. Brydon's knowledge is likened to a "great inheritance" which he can "lie and watch [...] grow" (429), and James himself has managed to contain in a concise and structured form, if not all the possible roads not taken, at least his idea of all the roads not taken, and to show us a singular truth:

there are many roads leading to Self-representation and many vehicles available for transportation, each one capable of getting us there; just don't expect them all to take us to the same place. (Battersby 43)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hamlin Garland recounts in *Roadside Meetings* James's words: "I would steep myself in America, I would know no other land. I would study its beautiful side. The mixture of Europe and America which you see in me has proved disastrous"

(461); allegedly made when he was visiting him at Rye in 1906 or 1907, quoted by Donadio 66.

<sup>2</sup>Henry James, *The American Scene*, quoted by Waters 183.

<sup>3</sup>"In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions. [...] There are few men who would not feel personally annihilated if a life-long construction of their hands or brain—say an entomological collection or an extensive work in manuscript—were suddenly swept away" (William James 291 and 293).

<sup>4</sup>Henry James, "The Jolly Corner," *Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, ed. and intr. Leon Edel (New York: The University Library, Grosset and Dunlap, 1963) 398. All subsequent quotes from this work will be referring to this edition.

<sup>5</sup>"What would it have made of me? What would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know!" (406).

<sup>6</sup>William James, quoted by Adams (66).

<sup>7</sup>Henry James published almost the total of his work in this American edition, known as the New York edition, in 24 volumes with prefaces, between 1907 and 1909.

<sup>8</sup>"While the ghost hints at a harshly literal life, Brydon had framed an essentially figurative one—in short, the scare quotes of a life, as its fleeting unstable secondary meaning" (Mitchell 229).

<sup>9</sup>"I hate American simplicity. I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort. If I could pronounce the name of James in any different or more elaborate way I should be in favor of doing it." Henry James in his *Letters*; quoted by Posnock 54.

<sup>10</sup>This synthesis of older interpretations is provided by Stovall 75.

<sup>11</sup>This synopsis of the various interpretations of the story, roughly from the 1970s and the 1990s, given by Shalyn Claggett, refers to the works of Ernest Tuveson, Russell Reising, William Flesh, Daniel Marc Fogel and Eric Savoy respectively; cf. Claggett 190.

<sup>12</sup>Byers 95. This idea is also sanctioned by Lee Clark Mitchell, who stresses the point that "in the play back and forth between literal and figurative meanings, it becomes clear that priority attaches to neither one," and perceives "the lurking sense that the ghost has been hunted by Brydon and all he now consummately represents" (229).

<sup>13</sup>Claggett also notes that "[t]he survival of the text's continuing signification is contingent on not believing it has one determinate meaning. Just as there is no one Brydon, there can be no single interpretation for the story" (198).

<sup>14</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), quoted by Zwinger 9.

<sup>15</sup>William James, quoted by Kress 269-70.

<sup>16</sup>Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment (1935) "sought to illustrate, curiously, not something only about physics but something about consciousness. The idea of the experiment was that the imaginary cat in an imaginary sealed box is subject to the completely unpredictable emission of a particle—which, if emitted, would release gas which killed the cat. But since the box is sealed, and the particle's emission is completely unpredictable, not only do we not know whether the cat is alive or dead but the 'actual' imagined cat is 'in reality' neither alive nor dead, until the box is opened and the cat examined" (Steinberg 97). Rachel Salmon records the same sort of multiple truths in *The Picture in the Carpet*: "Once it is clear that a choice cannot be made between the hypotheses, they may be experienced, no longer in sequence, but simultaneously. Such an experience transcends the temporal rules of both language and visual perception and is a potentiality rather than a property of the text. Only in the reader can textual ambiguity be transformed into paradox—the simultaneity of contradictory poles—an experience of the timeless in time" (Salmon 800).

<sup>17</sup>James concludes that "[i]f experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience"; Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, <<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/artfiction.html>> (14 Apr. 2010); html-version of the edition published in *Longman's Magazine* 4 (Sept. 1884), and reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (Macmillan, 1888); paragraphing and capitalization follow the Library of America edition.

<sup>18</sup>The translation is mine; the entire passage goes thus: "Le double n'est donc pas immédiatement la simple projection ou la personnification d'une pulsion inconsciente et coupable. Il est d'abord vertige du moi devant son propre vide, il est le fantôme du Moi, qui penché sur son propre néant est pris de vertige devant l'absence totale de centre, de référence, de valeurs."

<sup>19</sup>Henry James, notebook entry of August 9, 1900 (*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 189).

<sup>20</sup>"The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the

window may *not* open; 'fortunately' by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious" (*Critical Prefaces* 46).

<sup>21</sup>James talks of "narrating my 'hunt' for Lambert Strether, of describing the capture of the shadow projected by my friend's anecdote" (*Critical Prefaces* 313), and Brydon "had tasted of no pleasure so fine as his actual tension, had been introduced to no sport that demanded at once the patience and the nerve of this stalking of a creature more subtle, yet at bay perhaps more formidable, than any beast of the forest. The terms, the comparisons, the very practices of chase positively came again into play" ("The Jolly Corner" 412).

<sup>22</sup>In James's own words, "Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent *value* with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone" (*Critical Prefaces* 120).

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Ronen 168.

<sup>24</sup>According to Daniel J. Schneider, "James seizes on the idea with such avidity, he so richly floods his work with the vocabulary of hoarding and collecting and 'saving,' that some of his deepest fears and desires would seem to be brought into play by the idea" (449).

<sup>25</sup>R. P. Blackmur in his introduction to *Critical Prefaces by Henry James* xvi.

<sup>26</sup>Critical theorists have identified several narrative strategies of placing the virtual of the might have been within the framework of a literary work. Among them, Gerald Prince talks about the *disnarrated* being "all the events that *do not* happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text," and David Herman describes "hypothetical focalization" which assigns "the construction of virtuals—possible or counterfactual alternatives to fictional facts—to a hypothetical, fictionally nonexistent observer (witness)" (Doležel 151). However, James is not really using either of these strategies. Those things that could have happened but didn't are taken as active elements of the narrative which lead to the materialization of Brydon's *alter ego* and the "hypothetical focalization" coincides with the main character's point of view.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted by Tintner 258-59.

<sup>28</sup>It is an "action of the mind" which James describes as "encourag[ing] my consciousness to acquire that interest, to live in that elasticity and that affluence, which affect me as symptomatic and auspicious" ("Life After Death" 127).

<sup>29</sup>Henry James, *A Small Boy*, quoted by Tintner 255.

<sup>30</sup>"[T]he sudden pursuit, through an open door, along a huge high saloon, of a just dimly-described figure that retreated I terror before my rush and dash ... out



of the room I had a moment before been desperately, and all more abjectly, defending by the push of my shoulder against hard pressure on the lock and bar from the other side. The lucidity, not to say the sublimity, of the crisis had consisted of the great thought that I, in my appalled state, was probably still more appalling than the awful agent, creature, or presence, whatever he was. ... The triumph of my impulse, perceived in a flash as I acted on it by myself at a bound, forcing the door outward, was the grand thing, but the great point of the whole was the wonder of my final recognition. Routed, dismayed, the tables turned on him by my so surpassing him for straight aggression and dire intention, my visitant was already but a diminished spot in the long perspective, the tremendous, glorious hall, as I say, over the fat-gleaming floor of which ... he sped for *his life*"; Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, quoted by Esch 590-91. Even though, according to Leon Edel, the dream is placed about two years after the publication of the tale, Adeline R. Tintner interprets the dream to mean that "in the Galerie d'Appolon James recognized his vocation and routed the alter ego that would stand in the way of his artistic commitment" (Tintner 255-56).

<sup>31</sup>"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?" (413).

<sup>32</sup>"[...] I put my finger on what originally struck me as the very centre of my subject, and the element in it that I spoke hereabove of my having a bit discounted in the stuff of the *Jolly Corner*. The most intimate idea of *that* 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" (*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 507).

<sup>33</sup>For the entire quote see note 32.

<sup>34</sup>Henry James, quoted by McCarthy 275.

<sup>35</sup>In a notebook entry in 1895 James had mentioned the idea of a character "*recovering* a little of [...] the Dead Self, in his intercourse with [...] some woman [...] in whom it still lives a little," insisting that "*She is his Dead Self: he is alive in her and dead in himself*"; *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, entry of February 5, 1895, (112-13). This concept could also be linked to the fact that James was quite shocked to find out, after his sister's Alice death, her view of him as it transpired in her diaries.

<sup>36</sup>Henry James, quoted by Saltz 258.

<sup>37</sup>Henry James, quoted by Saltz 258.

<sup>38</sup>Henry James, quoted by Saltz 256.

<sup>39</sup>We learn only that "He could live in 'Europe,' as he had been in the habit of living, on the product of these flourishing New York leases" (398), and that he had "the experience of a man and the freedom of a wanderer, overlaid by pleasure, by infidelity [...] just by 'Europe' in short" (400); and Brydon himself alludes



to his previous life with the same vagueness refusing it its concreteness: "I've followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods; it must have come to you again and again—in fact you've admitted to me as much—that I was leading, at any time these thirty years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life" (408).

<sup>40</sup>"The quaint analogy quite hauntingly remained with him, when he didn't indeed rather improve it by a still intenser form: that of his opening a door behind which he would have made sure of finding nothing, a door into a room shuttered and void, and yet so coming, with a great suppressed start, on some quite erect confronting presence, something planted in the middle of the place and facing him through the dusk" (401).

<sup>41</sup>January 22, 1879, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 10.

<sup>42</sup>May 16, 1899, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 183.

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