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Other places, other selves

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Foreignness and the alter ego in Henry James's "The Jolly Corner"

Claude Forray

- 1 In the fiction of Henry James, the *other place* (by which I mean the transatlantic duality) is part of the artist's condition — both a creative tension and a critical ability to shift points of view. "The Jolly Corner" (a story of about 14,000 words first published in 1908 and included by James in his New York Edition in 1909) treats the *other place* with a special ambiguity that is closely linked with the question of the *other self*. The hero, Spencer Brydon, returns to his native New York at the age of fifty-six, after an uninterrupted thirty-three years' stay in Europe. He is deeply impressed by the changes he finds in New York and becomes obsessed by a question : «*What would it have made of me? What would it have made of me?*» (p 448). This obsession soon takes a more definite form which Spencer Brydon, thinking of his departure at the age of twenty-three («*almost in the teeth of my father's curse*» p 449), describes as follows :

«It comes over me that I had then a strange alter ego deep down somewhere
«within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud, and that I just took
«the course, I just transferred him to the climate, that blighted him for once and
«for ever.» (p 449)
- 2 The other self has thus been denied existence by the other place — Europe. To Spencer Brydon, this means that the original place — New York (more specifically, the house of his childhood and early youth in New York, which he calls his house on the jolly corner) — holds the speculative development of the other self, in other words that his alter ego now walks the empty house on the jolly corner. And, night after night, Brydon spends hours in the «*great gaunt shell*» (p 442) of a house, roaming the staircases, landings, rooms and corridors with a candle in his hand, to meet his alter ego.
- 3 The creative tension between the other place and the original place is felt in the presence of «*old, baffled, forsworn possibilities*» (p 455) in the house on the jolly corner. These possibilities make a «*scarce audible pathetic wail*» (p 455) to Spencer Brydon's ear every time he comes into the house and the steel point of his stick hits the black and white marble slabs of the hall pavement, turning the whole place into a crystal bowl with its rim set delicately humming by the visitor's touch. Now, these black and white

squares, Brydon reflects, were «*the admiration of his childhood*» and «*had made in him, as he now saw, for the growth of an early conception of style*» (p 455). And the stick links up with another image produced for Brydon as soon as he hears behind him the click of the house-door — the image of the life that begins for him «*as beguilingly as the slow opening bars of some rich music follow the tap of the conductor's wand*» (p 455). These are the harmonies of what might have been, and Brydon's «*hushed presence*» (p 455) among them aims at waking the old possibilities to make them take a «*Form*» (p 456).

- 4 The search for the alter ego is thus a type of literary creation. Spencer Brydon's quest of his own reflection coincides with the representation of Spencer Brydon. The words *represent* and *representation* are omnipresent in James's own discussions of his work, the prefaces to his *Novels and Tales* where he mostly tries with the aid of memory and analysis to recapture the birth and growth, in the writer's mind, of the work of fiction — how a state of consciousness was evolved. In the Jamesian critical vision, the reader meets the writer's words as a mirror, not in the sense that he necessarily finds his own image in them but that they work as a mirror does. Within the frame of the mirror, Spencer Brydon carries his own smaller mirror, more exactly a small candle which he plays around in the dusky spaces of the old house in the hope of catching the miraculous image of his unknown personality.

...he watched with his glimmering light; moving slowly, holding it high, playing it far, rejoicing above all, as much as he might, in open vistas, reaches of communication between rooms and by passages; the long straight chance or show, as he would have called it, for the revelation he pretended to invite. (pp 453-454)

- 5 The point of the «*reaches of communication between rooms*» is that success depends not just on seeing (as it would if one were looking for a lost key) but on involving in the vista some intermediate point of view, with the consequence that one is looking not merely at the projected location of the invited picture, but at the projected location plus the recording process of the invited picture. Brydon may look for his alter ego only in self-consciousness — «*not deterred from his gravity even while aware that he might, for a spectator, have figured some solemn simpleton playing at hide and seek*» (p 459) — and James insists in his preface to the tale that

prodigies, when they come straight, come with an effect imperilled; they keep all their character, on the other hand, by looming through some other history — the indispensable history of somebody's *normal* relation to something. (p XIX)

- 6 This brings home the truth that the writer is in love not only with his subject but also with his treatment of his subject. A further consequence is that the recording process must have another recording process in its own ken, since looking means looking both at the picture and at the onlooker. Here is Spencer Brydon on this multiplication of the creative and critical point of view :

...he might wonder at the taste, the native architecture of the particular time, which could rejoice so in the multiplication of doors... but it had fairly contributed to provoke this obsession of the presence encountered telescopically, as he might say, focussed and studied in diminishing perspective and as by a rest for the elbow. (p 466)

- 7 This is Brydon's hubris. He is a dilettante. His microscopic approach of the ready-made form (studying in diminishing perspective, by a rest for the elbow, the full-blown flower in the small tight bud) is exactly that of Gilbert Osmond in James's *Portrait of a Lady* : Osmond's rupture with Isabel, the final expression of his absolute barrenness, is performed as he works with fine brushes and a magnifying glass to copy in water-

colours a picture of an antique coin. But unlike Osmond, who is cynical because he knows that his aestheticism is good for nothing, Brydon is all wonder and sensitivity about the implications of his own early choice to live in 'Europe' — the other place — which, with the irony of simplification signalled by James's inverted commas, means the life of the dilettante. We find this self-questioning of his in his relationship with Alice Staverton, a woman he knew before he left New York and who has spent her life there in solitude and in a well-disciplined and mildly ironic refinement. Brydon says to Alice Staverton :

«... 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.» (p 450)

- 8 And he finally gives in, still before Alice Staverton, to his own painful sense of the wasted opportunity :

“And don't you see how, without my exile, I shouldn't have been waiting till now – ?” But he pulled up for the strange pang. (p 451)

- 9 The «*pang*» is precisely what Brydon never felt «*over there*» (p 449) and what would have produced some variation from his «*perverse young course*» (p 449). It must be stressed, however, that Brydon's «*pang*» now is not about Alice, but about what development of his own nature he may have missed that would have produced — in his own words — some different effect for his «*form*» (p 449).

- 10 In "The Jolly Corner", the other place stands for unredeemable time, by which is to be understood that what is locked up in the past is not a content of experience but the very contingency of the present. Brydon is very specific and insistent about what he calls his perversity : he chose to live in Europe out of a total absence of a reason, refused to agree to a deal, never had a doubt, never varied from the abysmal conceit of his own preference, and all for a third of a century. His return to New York does not give him regrets about what he has done — never mind his father's curse. It makes him see that his perversity was really his failure to perceive possibilities of life, and that there is no way now he can recover them. What he did in the other place was to cultivate this failure, to smother the emergencies of existence, and he gives Alice Staverton a striking example of this : he judged best, on one or two occasions, to burn some important letter unopened («*I've been sorry, I've hated it – I've never known what was in the letter*» p 448).

- 11 Unredeemable time is the source of the old baffled possibilities which come to life in fiction. Spencer Brydon's specular and speculative obsession is also spectral. But the form of the alter ego is unpredictable. He is not a ghost from the past; the dead and Brydon never exchange signs, although he feels the pressure of their palms on the door handles. The alter ego is the other self from the other place, with all the independence of foreignness. Brydon declares :

«He isn't myself. He's the just so totally other person. But I do want to see him.
«And I can. And I shall.» (p 451)

- 12 Fiction does not create forms; it seeks them out for their un-lived character and meets them as they are, thus forestalling the power they have to obsess and terrorize with sterility and remorse. In a typical Jamesian phrase, Brydon feels that he has «*turned the tables*» on his alter ego as he begins to chase him in the old house. The image of the beast in the jungle soon comes into play, and Brydon discovers that he is not afraid and that his vigilance has created alarm :

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? (pp 457-458)

- 13 This incalculable terror is that «he [Brydon], *standing there for the achieved, the enjoyed, the triumphant life, couldn't be faced in his triumph*» (p 476). We discover this in the attitude of the terrified alter ego who covers his face with his hands, when, having turned the tables again, he finally places himself in the way of the terrified Spencer Brydon. Narcissus at war with his image! Where does James lead us?
- 14 I said earlier that Brydon's dilettantism was his hubris. «*The form of success his imagination had most cherished*» was «*the strange apparition, at the far end of one of [the vistas], of his baffled 'prey'*» (pp 465-466). He always projected into it «*a refinement of beauty*» (p 466). On the fourth floor of the house one night, the night which is to end with the one terrible meeting, he finds a room-door closed, when he knows that, minutes before, he had made sure it was open all the more deliberately as the room in question is the last in a succession of four, all communicating together in a stimulating perspective. The closed door at the end of the vista gives notice («*like some stark signboard*» p467) that the mirror-within-a-mirror game is finished. Human sight always fails when it follows a chain of mirrors, and the ultimate reflection is locked in the heart of darkness. Brydon, whose insistence drops completely, stands before the closed door to record his *Discretion* : «*I retire, I renounce - never, on my honour, to try again. So rest for ever - and let me!*» (p 468). The theory of the full-blown flower in the small tight bud studied in diminishing perspective is false and puerile. It is the old fantasy of the homunculus (the perfectly formed man in the human egg or semen) designed to assure us that the world where forms are made is entirely like our world. Brydon discovers that the partition between the two worlds (the lived and the unlived), between the two places — with himself in this place and «*the thing palpably, provably done*» (p 467) in the other place — is a partition of foreignness, hostility and horror.
- 15 This discovery (although by now Brydon is struggling to escape its consequence) leaves him to face the central darkness in the mirror. It is now dawn, he wants to leave the house, and he moves towards the entrance door, which is surrounded by glazed spaces on each side and above. And there he meets
- vague darkness, to which the thin admitted dawn, glimmering archwise over the whole outer door, made a semicircular margin, a cold silvery nimbus that seemed to play a little as he looked - to shift and expand and contract (p 474).
- 16 Then the mirror yields its secret :
- He saw, in its great grey glimmering margin, the central vagueness diminish, and he felt it to be taking the very form toward which, for so many days, the passion of his curiosity had yearned (p 475).
- 17 This means that the door of the room upstairs has been opened, that the partition has broken down, that the alter ego is «*once more at large and in general possession*» (p 472) that the house on the jolly corner has become the other place, the foreign unlived place where forms originate. As he walks down the stairs to the dreadful meeting, Brydon feels he is in a «*watery under-world*», and when he looks down over the banisters he sees «*the bottom of the sea ... paved ... with the marble squares of his childhood*» (p 473). The alienation is complete : Brydon now thinks of the clear delight with which he will give up the house to the demolishers and developers whose overtures he used to turn down

so indignantly. And the alter ego, whose physiognomy becomes visible at the last, is precisely a specimen of vulgar acquisitiveness, ravaged by greed and fighting.

18 The alter ego's form, nevertheless, is a conscious achievement :

No portrait by a great modern master could have presented him with more intensity, thrust him out of his frame with more art, as if there had been "treatment", of the consummate sort, in his every shade and salience (pp 475-476).

19 It answers Brydon's cultivated perception of his other self :

... he had quite put it to himself from the first that, oh distinctly! he could "cultivate" his whole perception. He had felt it as above all open to cultivation – which indeed was but another name for his manner of spending his time. He was bringing it on, bringing it to perfection, by practice (p 459).

20 Here we have the link between the two selves, with the dilettante gradually waking, by his fine attention, the reality of the alter ego. The dilettante does not paint the portrait, he is even astonished when he sees it, but his delicate perception of the alter ego's presence (as when he wheels round to catch «*the stirred air of some other quick revolution*» p 460) is what brings together the un-lived possibilities left waiting in the other place. It is an act of violence because it aims to produce a reflection, in other words an enslavement in the conformity to self imposed by the mirror : what I might have been ought still to be myself. The desire of Narcissus belongs to the constituent link of artistic creation. «*Ma soif est un esclave nu*» says Paul Valéry's Narcissus in 1919; this image of «*My thirst is a naked slave*» is exactly embodied in the small sculpture which provides the original narrative connections in James's first novel, *Roderick Hudson*, begun in 1874 and whose theme is artistic creation and the problems of self. However, one can hardly suppose Henry James to have followed the erotic call of the naked slave to the watery world. Violence is indeed what he saw as the theme of "The Jolly Corner", and, referring to the composition of this tale, he writes in the preface :

... the spirit engaged with the forces of violence interests me most when I can think of it as engaged most deeply, most finely and most "subtly" (precious term!) For then it is that, as with the longest and firmest prongs of consciousness, I grasp and hold the throbbing subject; *there* it is above all that I find the steady light of the picture (p XXI).

21 The violence and the subtlety combine in the mirror. The other self moves in its own medium, in the other place, but the prongs of consciousness are after him, and Spencer Brydon, like Henry James, feels «*the joy of the instant, the supreme suspense created by big game alone*» (p 457).

22 The chase starts with a patient appropriation of the foreign medium, figured by Brydon's slowly acquiring the habit of moving in the dark. «*It made him feel, this acquired faculty, like some monstrous stealthy cat*» (p 458). This is the first turning of the tables. Then, by a calculated absence of three nights, Brydon seeks «*to create on the premises the baseless sense of a reprieve*» (p 460). In the logic of the chase, of the «*human actual social*» world (p 458), this should put the prey off its guard, but in the fertile medium of the other, the un-lived place, it immediately takes on the meaning of the unopened letter, of deliberately forsaken initiative, which immediately flowers into initiative. The result is Brydon's recognition, from that particular hour, of being «*tracked at a distance carefully taken and to the express end that he should the less confidently, less arrogantly, appear to himself merely to pursue*» (p 460). This is the second turning of the tables. As the tables are turned, the tension between the two selves is built up into an interlocking of purpose, will and feeling which appears as the very nerve of fictional writing. In his

dismayed recognition that the alter ego is now holding his ground, Brydon experiences «*the strangest, the most joyous, possibly the next minute almost the proudest, duplication of consciousness*» (p 461). This exaltation is the sense of the alter ego's independence and unpredictability, and therefore it contains the shame and solitude inflicted on the alter ego by Brydon's obstinately denying him existence for thirty three years, with the crowning indignity of forcing him to exhibit his shame through the violence of the mirror. The chase ends in disgust with the hostile meeting — an «*immense revulsion*» (p 476).

- 23 But the dilettante is not put off his own character by his discomfiture. He is not tricked into moral judgment by a feeling for the alter ego's discovered plight. He regards him resolutely as «*a black stranger*» (p 483) and interprets the bitter meeting in strict accordance with his personal disillusion :

The face, *that face*, Spencer Brydon's? ... He had been "sold", he inwardly moaned, stalking such game as this : the presence before him was a presence, the horror within him a horror, but the waste of his nights had been only grotesque and the success of his adventure an irony. (pp 476-477)

- 24 The central darkness in the mirror, out of which the alter ego materializes, is the unredeemable waste of the old baffled possibilities, and the surface of the mirror becomes bright only inasmuch as the central darkness vibrates towards it, as the un-lived possibilities turn and take shape, «*even as the trodden worm of the adage must at last bristle* » (p 462). The moment Brydon feels the first sign of the alter ego's resistance — the exalted moment of duplicated consciousness — he finds himself slipping into an abyss of idealism, «*slipping and slipping on some awful incline* » (p 462), and he instinctively closes his eyes :

When he opened them the room, the other contiguous rooms, extraordinarily, seemed lighter — so light, almost, that at first he took the change for day. (p 463)

- 25 The light in the mirror shines out of its central darkness shaken by the violence of Narcissus :

Quand l'opaque délice où dort cette clarté
Cède à mon corps l'horreur du feuillage écarté
Paul Valéry (Fragments du Narcisse, I, 64-65)

- 26 Brydon's violence will not be tempted by delight or softened into sympathy. It is fanatically, puritanically, curious.

- 27 What it discovers is the inexhaustible fertility of the other place. After his collision with the enraged alter ego, Brydon lies in a swoon for many hours on the black and white marble squares of the hall, where he is found and brought back to life by Alice Staverton. Having now come to himself — and to the love of Alice Staverton — he measures the wealth of his present state by the emptiness of his thirty-three years' lapse :

It had brought him to knowledge, to knowledge — yes, this was the beauty of his state; which came to resemble more and more that of a man who has gone to sleep on some news of a great inheritance, and then, after dreaming it away, after profaning it with matters strange to it, has waked up again to serenity of certitude and has only to lie and let it grow. (p 479)

- 28 This «*treasure of intelligence waiting all round him for quiet appropriation* » (p 478), is the matter of fiction. «*Art is doing* » said Henry James. No wonder then the adventure of Spencer Brydon brings into the grove of Narcissus the heroic resolution to work out some technical effectiveness, and no doubt this carries some Spenserian rigidity — to

the amusement of Alice Staverton, and to our own. But the right of the other self to forlornness and mutilation is permanently established in the other place — Brydon winces when he thinks of his alter ego's two lost fingers — and a final certitude in the story (though perhaps not so serene) is that to one impervious to the scarce audible pathetic wail the triumph of Form can never be granted.

RÉSUMÉS

Dans "The Jolly Corner", Henry James, comme plus tard Luigi Pirandello dans *Sei Personaggi*, visite ce que l'on pourrait nommer les limbes de la création littéraire. Le sujet de cette nouvelle, quête de l'alter ego, du "je" qui est "un autre" parce que mon exil "ailleurs" l'a empêché d'être "moi", postule que ce "je" fictif, ce personnage, possède bel et bien une existence indépendante. Mais c'est une existence de honte et de souffrance, à cause de moi qui suis l'insupportable triomphe de la vie réelle : en écartant les branches pour voir son reflet dans l'eau, le Narcisse de Paul Valéry fait entrer "l'horreur" dans cet autre monde où naît la forme merveilleuse et orpheline. Spencer Brydon, Narcisse de "The Jolly Corner", avec une brutalité toute puritaine, traque son alter ego comme un gibier jusqu'à faire, dans une grande révolte, la découverte de l'infinie tristesse de l'univers des formes.

AUTEURS

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professeur au Lycée Chevroliier à Angers, enseigne depuis près de trente ans la langue anglaise à tous les niveaux et dans une grande diversité de filières. Bien qu'il ne soit pas enseignant-chercheur, il a consacré beaucoup de temps à la réflexion critique sur les oeuvres littéraires, notamment dans le cadre de cours à l'Université d'Angers. Formé à Grenoble dans un courant fortement influencé par les travaux post-bachelardiens de Gilbert Durand, il s'est cependant détourné des méthodes analytiques puisant aux sources de Freud et de Jung pour chercher dans l'oeuvre écrite, justement à la suite de Henry James, l'imminence des profondeurs (au lieu du projet de les visiter), n'oubliant pas que Dante a logé pour l'éternité Virgile et Homère dans la zone vague qui précède l'enfer et que la forme est un cadeau, dont il importe d'apprécier la valeur (c'est-à-dire la magie suggestive, le pouvoir d'imminence, gage de vraie profondeur) en sachant s'abstenir de la "démonter comme une curieuse montre", comme disait (autre modèle) Debussy.