

*Karen Smythe*

## Imaging and Imagining: "The Jolly Corner" and Self-construction

In *The Power of Blackness*, Harry Levin writes that

any personage conceived by any writer must—to a certain extent—be an alter ego, a personal surrogate, a composite figure standing somewhere between the writer's experience and his impression of others; of that relationship, Henry James has drawn a diagram in "The Jolly Corner," where the abandoned house conceals the missing man, who turns out to be the self that might have been: "A black stranger!" (5)

James's "diagram" of writer and *alter ego* is more accurately, I suggest, the depiction of a man in the *process* of coming to terms with the fantastic relationship between these parts of himself, a relationship that oscillates uneasily between the real and the imaginary. In "The Jolly Corner" James combines elements of realism and fantasy, drawing attention to the form of the third person story at the level of structure as well as language. The story is structured around Spencer Brydon's imaginative search for the fantastic image of his "other." Yet Brydon is also a writer figure, and on the linguistic level, he attempts to image this "other." What is at stake on the first level of the story is the idea of the "other," whereas on the next level, it is the representation of the "other" that is called into question.

The doubled story, therefore, is implicitly allegorical. But since the character Brydon is attempting to "write about" is himself—his own "ineffable identity" (333)—his story is therefore an autobiographical tale as well. "The Jolly Corner" may thus be read as an "allegory of autobiography," in that it uses themes and structures of the fantastic on the first level of story, but on a secondary level it explores the process of figuration, of

writing. If "[a]llegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read," as Paul de Man argues (*Allegories* 205), then in "The Jolly Corner," the failure to read is Brydon's failure to recognize the principle of difference within identity. Other of James's late tales also possess this characteristic condition of allegory: "The Altar of the Dead," "The Beast in the Jungle," "The Death of the Lion," and *The Aspern Papers* are examples. While these tales are all allegories of reading and writing to some extent, they are not particularly focused on problems of autobiography, as is "The Jolly Corner."

Allegory, very simply stated, is a form of extended metaphor, whereby the primary or surface story has a second symbolic meaning which is distanced from the first; as Angus Fletcher states in his well-known study *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, "[i]n the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another" (2). But the definition of "allegory" becomes much more complex when it is qualified by a genitive phrase such as "the allegory of autobiography." The phrase then means either that the allegory is about autobiography, or that autobiography itself is allegorical in that the written "I" is merely a figure for the "self." Clearly both interpretations of the phrase are accurate in describing "The Jolly Corner." The goal of both allegory and autobiography is a unified reading of a system or of a life, a reading which, in terms of interpretation, is really a *failure* to read, since the predisposition toward a unified identity tends to exclude alternate interpretations—readings of the "other."

James personifies such abstractions as the "writer figure," "the reader," and "the other" in order to represent them figuratively in characters or as prosopopoetic objects. One of these figures—that of the "other"—is literalized as Brydon's ghost. The trope of personification allows James to indicate that there is a distance between the selves—between the "self" and "other"; it also figures the vexed relationship between these and other "selves" in autobiography. Brydon's problem is that of any autobiographer: he must try to conflate the roles of writer and character, in order to write about a seemingly unified self. In other words, he must try to close the gap between his various selves, which are temporally separated, in order to construct a coherent "I." His is a theoretical problem of autobiographical subjectivity, then. Philippe Lejeune writes:

It is as if, in autobiography, no combination of the personal pronouns could "fully express" the person in a satisfactory manner. Or rather, to put it less naively, all imaginable combinations reveal, with differing degrees of

clarity, the nature of the person—the tension between impossible unity and intolerable division and the fundamental schism which turns the speaker into a fugitive. (32)

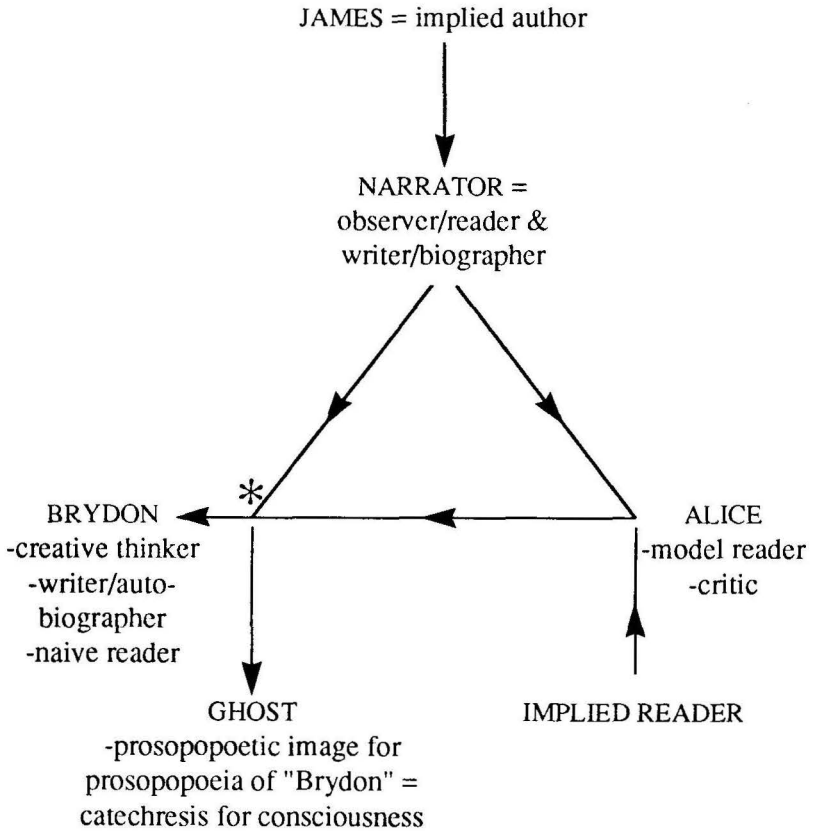
Although Brydon seeks self-confirmation in the "other," he is also a fugitive in the sense that he is alienated from, and actively evading, the knowledge of the self which an understanding of the "other" could provide. The force that drives Brydon and the story is his desire to be united with the "other," a desire produced by the "intolerable division" within himself. If allegory is a literature of desire, as Joel Fineman suggests (26), then Brydon's desire is to achieve an "impossible unity," to close the ontological gap between himself and the "other," an alternate self which he explicitly calls his *alter ego*.

This pronomial figure is literalized in the tale, and such literalization, according to Tzvetan Todorov, is one indication of the fantastic in literature (77). Todorov writes that "the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). Brydon certainly undergoes this type of confrontation, and the resultant hesitation is twofold. For the question that James's fantastic tale asks is "How does one know the past?" (whether it is lost, un-lived, or forgotten)—but on another, rhetorical level, the question that the autobiographical tale asks is "How does one know oneself, and then proceed to write one's various past, present and perhaps even future *selves*?"

In James's allegory, it is implied that the attempt to write about oneself is futile; it is impossible to represent the self with any combination of pronouns. Autobiography has an allegorical structure, then, since allegory, "in attempting and always failing to represent Reality," as Stephen Greenblatt notes, "inevitably reveals the impossibility of this project" (vii). Paul de Man argues in "Autobiography as De-Facement" that autobiography

is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual, reflexive substitution. ("Autobiography" 921)

If "The Jolly Corner" is an allegory of this structure (which is itself allegorical), it will be possible to diagram the relationships between the literal subjects (narrator, Brydon, Alice and ghost) and the figurative literary referents (writers, readers, critics, and text):



\* JOLLY CORNER =  
theoretical intersection of subjects or  
"selves" in autobiography

In this reading of "The Jolly Corner" the metaleptical phrase "allegory of autobiography" can be translated to mean a figuration for the figure of reading; it is a trope of a trope, or a catechresis for "reading." "The Jolly Corner" is not only a fantastic story about confronting the unconscious self, as it may appear on the thematic level; it is a story about self-conscious writing. In the schema, we see prosopopoetic images—characters and objects—in place of the more abstract or conceptual literary roles which I have noted. These roles are not as clearly demarcated as the schema or allegory makes them seem. For example, the narrator is obviously a writer figure in the story—he "writes" Brydon's tale, and is, in effect, Brydon's biographer. However, as an omniscient narrator, he also observes Brydon at very close range, and "reads" Brydon before he writes about him. There is already a complex interrelation between reading and writing in this simple diagram.

Brydon's is an even more complicated case. His "odd pastime" (329) is past time, as he attempts to confront his past and the potential self located therein. He *sees* his life as a narrative vision, and he yearns for his selves to take "'Form'" (329). Even the motive for his pastime is imagined, consisting of "the desire to waylay [his *alter ego*] and meet him" (329). He also thinks of his past experiences as a sportsman as "passages" (329), like passages in a story. Since Brydon imagines his life as it might have been—he prefigures it, in "book" form (332)—he is in this sense a creative thinker rather than an autobiographical writer. For instance, he is preoccupied with the "*thought* of recording his Discretion" (339; emphasis mine), with mental note-taking or imagining, and not with imaging, with the translation of thought to writing (344).

Paul Ricoeur implies that imagining is a form of writing. In "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling," Ricoeur says that to imagine "is not to have a mental picture of something but to display relations in a depicting mode" (148). Brydon, in this figurative light, is a certain type of writer then. He does display his mental pictures in depicting modes, verbally—in figures of speech. For example, he uses analogy to describe or depict his *alter ego*: "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*" (344; emphasis mine). After a conversation about this simile, Alice comments that his chosen life had not "spoiled" his "speaking" (325), his flowery language, or his rhetoric. But Brydon's rhetoric is proven to constitute an incomplete sense of himself in that he retains a false self-

image, only unified because it is exclusive of the "other." And, when Brydon actually does confront the "other," he denies its identity as his own: "[i]t was unknown, inconceivable, awful, disconnected from any possibility!" (344). His writing or "figuring" is therefore fictional rather than autobiographical.

Brydon cannot successfully translate his imaginings to story for other reasons that are also related to the theoretical problems of subjectivity. Lejeune claims that

one cannot write an autobiography without constructing and communicating a point of view towards oneself. This point of view, whether complex or ambiguous, can open up gaps between the narrator's perspective and that of the character, or enable the author to piece together and thus retrieve or modify the image he thinks others have of him. . . . [But] [t]he articulation of two truly differing points of view concerning a single individual cannot be accomplished in autobiography. (41)

Clearly, James has literalized "two truly differing points of view" in the figures of Brydon and the ghost, demonstrating Brydon's misreading of himself. Neither a falsely unified view nor two differing views of the self make autobiography possible. In order for Brydon to overcome these problems to the extent that an *illusion* of self may be constructed in an autobiographical structure, then, he would have to reconcile his self and his *alter ego*, to accommodate the latter in the former—which is something he cannot "face," as becomes clear at the end of the tale.

But James also places Brydon in the role of a reader, one who must interpret his projected self-construction. He becomes a failed reader, incapable of deciphering the meaning of his "other." In evidence of this reading of Brydon is his admission of having destroyed unopened one or two important letters in the past (324), an act that parallels his rejection in the past of his *alter ego*; as a result, he is unable to "read" either the letters or himself in the present. He describes his present curiosity about the letters' contents as a "figure" for his feelings about his past potential self (324).<sup>1</sup> The absent letters are, then, analogous to the absent "small tight bud" which he also "blighted" (344). Since the bud is Brydon's figure for another, lost self, and the letters are, I suggest, a figure for the bud, then the letters are also a figure of a figure for the absent self. This is a necessarily catechretic construction, denoting the impossibility of writing the self—the impossibility of autobiography.

Paul Smith notes that "in the autobiographical mode the "I" that speaks typically becomes a kind of *de facto* third-person pronoun, supposedly having full possession of that which it views" (105). Smith's use of the word "supposedly" implies that autobiography is an illusion of a unified self. This notion that a third person narrator somehow substitutes for autobiographical subjectivity seems to be inscribed in "The Jolly Corner" by the fact that James uses the third person narrator to tell the autobiographical tale. Though Brydon cannot write the tale, because he lacks the "full possession of that which [he] views," he does feel that his perception is "open to cultivation—which indeed was another name for his manner of spending his time" (331). In other words, the "cultivation" of his perceptions is a figure of speech for the allegorical action of the tale—interpreting signs, reading—wherein the imagined observations are transformed into language, and possibly knowledge as well.

Brydon is not, however, an ideal reader of his own narrative. He imagines the figurative (the *alter ego*) in literal terms, and expects to find a duplicate of himself rather than a part of himself therein. The ghost, a "character" in the allegory ("The Jolly Corner" 333), is a prosopopoetic signifier of a lost part of Brydon, one that he had hoped would be a "duplication of consciousness" (333). With this personified concept, James is using a catechretic series of figures to suggest the impossibility of accurately representing the self in autobiographical discourse. The ghost is obviously the supernatural element of the allegory, which is "fantastic" in thematic terms; but in rhetorical terms, he/it is an unacknowledged synecdoche of Brydon's unrepresentable subjectivity.

Brydon's meeting with the ghost, which is an intersection of self and "other," is figured in my diagram by the prosopopoetic "jolly corner." Far from jolly, this meeting is a near-fatal experience for Brydon. When he finds that the ghost is horribly unrecognizable as himself, we realize (though Brydon does not) that his idea of his "other" was inaccurate. He believes that "the success of his adventure was an irony" (344), that what he found, in place of his *alter ego*, was a "stranger." But the irony instead lies in the fact that Brydon does *not* recognize the face as a now disfigured version of his (younger) self, where clearly Alice and the reader do. This irony is produced by the form of the allegory itself, with its two levels of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Brydon's imagined self-construction, then, nearly led to self-destruction. The irony of the "I" pronoun (itself a figure, a "fantastic image") causes him

to lose control of his story—his autobiography—as well as of himself. "Figure and ground can . . . treacherously shift" in this tale, as Annette Benert notes (123), which is literally the situation that Brydon encounters. He loses ground; he loses consciousness (344), and dies a metaphoric death. Alice Staverton brings Brydon back to life—"literally," as he puts it (346), and also figuratively—she reads his story or autobiography critically, bringing *it* to life as well. She interprets his images and imagination even before he has confronted the ghost, because she understands him completely—she has imagined the complete Brydon.

Alice recognizes that the ghostly part of his past is one portion of his present subjectivity. She is able to know him as "completely" as possible under the circumstances: she knows him "in part," and recognizes the synecdochic relationship between his selves and his "self." She is able to distinguish part from whole, something which Brydon is unable to do, and the reader performs a version of Brydon's error until Alice's perspective corrects the angle of entry into the text.

But Alice imagines or envisions the ghost in what prove, once she "reads" his face, to be accurate terms:

Because, as I told you weeks ago, my mind, my imagination, had 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. . . . (349)

Alice recognizes the face of Brydon in the face of the ghost, and thus states: "'to me . . . he was no horror. I had accepted him'" (349). The ghost is horrific only because of the effect that Brydon's materialistic ambitions have had on him. Alice is, perhaps, the wise reader who has insight into the meaning of Brydon's "other." She adopts Brydon's images and language, and believes in the "flower" (325)—the other self, the ghost—that is in the "small tight bud" (which Brydon figured for his unblighted *alter ego*).<sup>3</sup> But she reads these images differently than does Brydon, and withholds her interpretation of the flower, keeping Brydon (and the reader) in suspense: "I'll tell you some other time!" she says to him when he asks for a description, a critical interpretation, of what he calls "the wretch" (326).

If "criticism is a metaphor for the act of reading," as de Man argues in "The Rhetoric of Blindness" (107), then Alice's role as critic in the schematic allegory is identical to the role of the model reader of Brydon's



unwritten "autobiography," his self-constructions. She reinterprets Brydon's misinterpretations, and acts as an "internal corrector" (Benert 119). Alice has what the narrator calls "the clearness that was like the breath of infallibility" (348). Even an ideal reader is not infallible, however, and Alice's readings are not infallible either; her insight is *like* the breath of infallibility, not equal to it.

Despite the narrator's claim of Alice's "clearness," it is what Alice finally says that makes the end of the story ironic. Alice denies that the ghost is Brydon, which seems to be a contradiction of her previous interpretation. But her partly hesitant, partly emphatic "he isn't—no, he isn't—you!" (350) does not deny that the ghost is indeed a part of Brydon; rather, it suggests Alice's understanding that the ghost is a part of Brydon in the sense that it represents both what Brydon might have been, and what he very possibly will become. Since Brydon himself does not come to insight, Alice's tactful and tactical statement reassures him that his rejection of the ghost as a figure for himself is an appropriate response to his self-confrontation. Alice allows him to retain his false sense of self, "his proved identity" (350), because she cherishes the "knowledge . . . of presences of the other age"—the presence of an uncorrupted Brydon—" [that are] still exposed" (318). As a figure for the model reader or critic, she interprets with clarity, and indeed, her interpretation is consistent with her long-term interest in Brydon. Yet with the ironic ending of the tale, James leaves alternate readings open for the implied reader.<sup>4</sup>

As Todorov notes, "the fantastic, unlike many other genres, includes *numerous* indications as to the role the reader must play . . . [and] that this feature derives more generally from the process of uttering as it is presented within the text itself" (89). "The Jolly Corner," I have suggested, is a fantastic tale relating the "fantastic development of [Brydon's] own nature" ("The Jolly Corner" 324); it is also a tale which focuses on the processes of uttering, of writing and of reading one's life, and oneself. James uses complex figurations to produce a fantastic story that is also an "allegory of autobiography." Thus, "The Jolly Corner" exemplifies the theoretical problems facing a writer whose goal is textual self-construction.

## NOTES

1. James did believe that letters should not be left for posthumous publication, but the destruction of *unopened* letters is clearly a morally questionable act, one which recurs as a theme of intrigue, mystery and broken contracts in other James texts as well—*The Aspern Papers* and "The Death of the Lion," for example.
2. De Man suggests that irony and allegory share a structure, in that [i]n both cases, the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference. ("Rhetoric" 192)
3. An alternate interpretation of "the ghost" would be that it is a prefiguration for a future Brydon. Indeed, the "seed" of the ghost is there in Brydon as we find him in the story; he apparently has led what he describes as a "scandalous life," (325), and lives on what Alice ironically calls "ill-gotten gains" (321).
4. Deborah Esch writes that Alice Staverton "is an example for the reader of the tale" which is "beyond Brydon's, or Alice's, or the narrator's, or the reader's influence." She is a neutral example, then, and it is only in this sense that she is an "ideal" reader.

## WORKS CITED

- Benert, Annette. "Dialogical Discourse in 'The Jolly Corner': The Entrepreneur as Language and Image." *The Henry James Review* 8.2 (Winter 1987).
- de Man, Paul. "Allegory (*Julie*)." *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Autobiography as De-Facement." *Modern Language Notes* 94.5 (December 1979). 919-30.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Blindness and Insight*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Charles S. Singleton. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1969.
- Esch, Deborah. "A Jamesian About-Face: Notes on the Jolly Corner." *ELH* 50.3 (Fall 1983). 602-3.
- Fineman, Joel. "The Structure of Allegorical Desire." *Allegory and Representation*. Ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981. 26-60.
- Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. New York: Cornell UP, 1964.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Preface." *Allegory and Representation*. Ed. S. Greenblatt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.
- James, Henry. "The Jolly Corner." *Eight Tales from the Major Phase*. Ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel. New York: Norton, 1958.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Autobiography in the Third Person." *New Literary History* 9.1 (Autumn 1977). 27-50.
- Levin, Harry. *The Power of Blackness*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling." *On Metaphor*. Ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.

- Smith, Paul. *Discerning the Subject. Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 55. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973.