

Losing Oneself: Autobiography, Memory, Vision*

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Henry James begins *A Small Boy and Others* by explaining why he found it difficult to respond to a request. Having been asked, shortly after William's death, to write a memoir of his brother, he is forced to explain that he cannot do so in a direct and simple way, for he is not the master of his own thoughts. The very attempt to recall his experiences with his older brother has immersed him in a flood of associations. Since "it was to memory in the first place that my main appeal for particulars had to be made," the request leads him "to live over the spent experience itself" and thereby to see the associations from the past "beg[*i*]n to multiply and...swarm" in his mind. Fascinated by these memories, he finds that he cannot dissociate those of William from the thousands of others that are enveloping him, "so inseparably and beautifully they seemed to hang together and the comprehensive case to decline mutilation" (3). Instead, then, of writing a memoir of his brother, he delivers himself to these associations, luxuriating in his memories of the sights that had fascinated him in his childhood and now do so again.

This essay seeks to examine certain qualities of Jamesian thought and the effects that they have on the author's attempt to represent his younger self in *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*; their fundamental result is to render the author foreign to himself. The fiction to which James had devoted much of his life is marked by a state in which, in the words of Sigmund Freud, "the thought-process itself [has] becom[e] sexualized"; the very act of thinking can, in certain circumstances, become a source of jouissance ("Notes" 124). In the novels and stories, one of the results of this libidinalization of thinking is a recurring concern with ambiguity; works such as "The Turn of the Screw" and *The Sacred Fount* stand as what the narrator of the latter book might well have called "perfect palaces of thought": texts whose

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extreme epistemological ambiguity makes them the perfect vehicles for the *jouissance* of thinking (Holland, 140). Since each detail of these works can be read either as confirming or as working against the theories constructed by their first-person narrators, they can afford one the joy of an almost infinite contemplation and analysis of their details, in the fortunately fruitless attempt to reach a definitive conclusion (Rimmon, xi-xii). Peter Brooks, in extending this problematic to James's own life, has recently remarked that he is "not so convinced as some critics that James was 'unhappy' (whatever that means) with his life, including his version of sexuality" precisely because of his "epistemophilia"—because of the *jouissance* that the author invested in thinking and knowing (124). This essay seeks to analyze what results from this *jouissance* when James, near the end of his life, tries to transform his own experience into a text. The form that James adopts in order to recount his life both exemplifies this enjoyment and seeks to counter it in a fashion that arouses a fundamental anxiety.

In the autobiographies, the libidinal qualities of his thought are manifest from the opening pages, and that they are derived, in this case, from his memories of the act of looking. In the opening pages of the autobiographies, the memories that most enthrall the author are those concerned with vision. For example, James treats the reader to a lovingly detailed description of the marble facade of his grandmother's house in Albany and the pinkish-red front of the dame-school that was to be found across the street from it; indeed, he even pauses to consider the ways in which his memory has played tricks on him, before noting to himself, "I lose myself in rapture before the marble and the pink" (9). Shortly afterward, remembering the "New York *flâneries*" that he had once undertaken, the author now recreates in his mind—and on paper—what his younger self had seen, and thus can re-experience these sights as "pictures." As he exclaims, "Wonderful altogether, in fact, I find as I write, the quantity, the intensity of picture recoverable from even the blindest and tenderest state of the little canvas." While recalling the way in which the child had "dawdle[d]" in the street and "gaped" at the sights, the

author finds that “I positively dawdle and gape here—I catch myself in the act” (17).

In lingering over these memories, the author shows the extent to which seeing, like thinking, has become eroticized; he describes the young boy as someone for “whom contemplation takes so much the place of action” and shows that the act of looking had, from the earliest moments, been the object of a libidinal investment (17). The older narrator is now able to recuperate, through the process of thinking and remembering, something of the *jouissance* that he had once derived from his childhood acts of seeing. Having plunged into the torrent of associations and then catching himself in the act of gaping at them, the author is continuously startled by the enjoyment that he derives from them.

This experience of enjoyment in re-seeing childhood experiences may have been a necessary condition for beginning to compose the autobiography, but it is hardly a sufficient condition for the production of the books that we now have. The *jouissance* of thinking may have freed the author from the alienating request that he write a memoir in which he would have figured only as a subsidiary character. To immerse himself completely in his own memories, however, would be a way of cutting himself off from others: of writing a book entirely for himself, while failing to take into account any consideration of possible readers. Now, the autobiographies are, on the contrary, texts that manifest a careful consideration for the reader; at each moment when the author risks losing himself entirely in his memories, he finds himself pulling back from this position in order to address the reader: to place the various pictures that he has succeeded in recapturing within enough of a context that the movement of his thought remains fairly comprehensible for the reader. What makes the book intelligible for us, then, is the intervention of another force: a principle for the production of the text that goes in the opposite direction from the solitary *jouissance* that the author has been describing, a principle that opens the text to others.

James describes this principle much later, in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, where he attempts to

state one of the methods that he has used to compose these texts. He reveals that he had long been “haunted” by the wish to relate “The personal history...of an imagination” and would gladly have done so, if he “could first [have] ‘ca[ught]’” this imagination (455, 454). Finally, after years of waiting for this figure to arrive, “It happened...that he was to turn up...in a shape almost too familiar at first for recognition” for, he discovers, he was *himself* the figure that he had been seeking (455). According to this description, James, in finding what he wants, recognizes only tardily that he is really seeing himself. This character “had been with me all the while and only too obscurely and intimately—I had not found him in the market as an exhibited or *offered* value. I had in a word to draw him forth from within rather than meet him in the world before me, the more convenient sphere of the objective” (455). The task of the autobiographer is to take this obscure and intimate figure and to make him “objective.”

James’s description of this discovery raises a number of questions. First of all, his use of the term, “objective,” may seem surprising. Was it not, indeed, the concern with recapturing his *subjective* experience that underlay his early discussion of the method of following the intricate paths of associations wherever they took him? What, if any relation exists between the determination not to cut the threads of association and this new emphasis on an objective presentation? Paul John Eakin has suggested that the views expressed in the two passages are mutually incompatible and indeed, “cancel each other out” (61).

In opposition to Eakin’s contention, this essay seeks to argue that much of the disturbing power of the autobiographies derives from the tension and interaction between the methods discussed in the two passages. The second passage suggests that for James, an autobiographer should not simply be content with following out the path of his associations; the results of the method that this passage unveils, however, disturb our intuitive spatial sense of the world, reverse the visual relations established by the first method and entail an identification that the narrator can never fully occupy. In our everyday lives, we tend to make a relatively simple

distinction between inside and outside: our subjective “selves” are located on the inside and the world of others on the outside. According to the second method, however, the autobiographer must present his younger self not as if it were a part of himself—a source of his memories—but as a character in a book, and thus, in a sense, as someone else. He must therefore narrate the work from a position that tries to be fundamentally *external* to that self; this is the sense of the injunction to make this portrayal objective, as if he were seeing that self “in the world before me.”

This “objective” method of presentation also reverses the polarities of vision established by the associational method. If the first of these procedures presented the boy as the one who looks and the author as a man whose memories consist, in large part, of what the latter has seen, the second places the young Henry under the gaze. The younger self, according to James’s schemes, would serve as the center of interest that lights up the stage on which he has been placed. “[W]ouldn’t the *light* in which [this character] might so cause the whole *scene* to unroll inevitably become as fine a thing as possible to represent?” (455, my emphasis). What these passages suggest is that in writing these books, James is imagining that his younger self is being looked at. *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother* are written from the position of an author who has revisited his experiences and remembers the early joy that he has taken in looking, and who is now seeking to reverse the polarities of vision: he is trying to turn the young boy who looked into someone who, rather than seeing, is seen.

This impulse to transform the seer into the seen is a project that is obviously fraught with problems, not least because, for the narrator, it involves an identification that is fundamentally impossible. If the narrator is to present the young boy “objectively,” as a figure who is external to himself, he is obliged to identify with someone else, someone for whom the child is indeed a separate figure: the reader. At bottom, it is only the reader, and not the autobiographer, who is fully distinct from the young Henry and who is thus able to see him from a more purely external

position. The objective method, then, involves a continual attempt on the part of the author to see his younger self as a reader would be likely to see him. James acknowledges the difficulties of this situation when he notes that “objectivity, the prize to be won,” could “just be frightened away by the odd terms of the affair” and that “It is of course for my reader to say whether or no what I have done *has* meant defeat” (455). Such an attempt is, of course, fundamentally impossible, for how can he ever know how his younger self is seen from the reader’s perspective? The subjective experience of losing oneself, which had begun merely as an inability to master the progression of his thoughts, now takes the form of a far more radical self-estrangement.

The formal conditions by which this text was produced seem sufficiently unusual that they invite certain speculations. It can be asked whether the position in which the author places himself must not necessarily lead, for him, to a sense of unease. First of all, what can we imagine to be the effects of the technique of bringing the gaze to bear upon the small boy? If the author had at first been overwhelmed by his memories of this boy, the objective method introduces a sense of distance between himself and his earlier self, making the latter figure seem less immediate, its memories less overwhelming and its concerns less pressing. Now, the greater the distance that the author puts between himself and us, on the one hand, and the boy on the other, the smaller the latter will seem to us; indeed, if we are placed at an enormous distance from him, we will see him as little more than a point. This is all the more the case since what we see is the young boy in the act of looking; we catch him, in the words of Jacques Lacan, in the position of a subject “sustaining himself in a function of desire” (85). The autobiographies trap the child in this position, thus sometimes producing the effect of making him seem like a small, trivial and even slightly pathetic figure. This reduction, indeed, may not be without discomfort for the author, who, for all his claims to distance and objectivity, cannot, of course, cut definitively his ties with the young boy.

The second source of unease manifests itself in two passages in his description of the objective method, passages that hint at a feeling of the uncanny, which Freud defined as the sense that something that is familiar and intimate is also utterly foreign. The first of these is the experience of not recognizing himself as the figure that he had been seeking—the figure who embodies the principle of active imagination—followed by the sudden shock of self-recognition. The second proceeds in the opposite direction; instead of involving the sudden understanding that what had seemed foreign was actually intimate, it renders strange what had once been familiar. In order to make his presentation of himself objective, James asserts that “I...had to turn nothing less than myself inside out” (455). This statement, when taken literally, creates a disturbing image of a thoroughgoing defamiliarization of the body, and in doing so, radicalizes the already existing disturbance of our sense of space. It allows us to imagine the transformation of the body into a sort of topological figure that can be made unrecognizable by a series of manipulations: a reversal that places the outside of the body on the inside and the inside on the outside. The “objective” method had begun by requiring that the narrator see his younger self as an external figure, and the result of this attempt is that inside and outside have become entirely reversed for him. This image highlights the radical way in which what was most familiar to James is made alien to him by the form that he has imposed upon himself in writing this autobiography; the effect of this way of writing is to make James foreign to himself. With this latest evocation of an encounter with the alterity that exists within what is most familiar to us, we are not far from the territory of anxiety, if anxiety is taken to be the encounter with something that bears an intimate relation to oneself, while at the same time seeming radically other.

The threshold into anxiety pure and simple is crossed only once in the autobiography: in the famous nightmare set in the Galerie d'Apollon. In the autobiography, the dream becomes related to the process by which the text was written; one may presume that the origin of the

dream itself, which occurred years after James's first sight of the Louvre, is connected with his earliest responses to Europe. Not the least of the ways by which Europe distinguished itself for the young Henry was that it was the place in which he found himself under the gaze in a particularly marked way. This is not simply because his obviously foreign appearance frequently attracted what the narrator calls "the from-head-to-foot stare" and a "curiosity void of sympathy" from the boys in the cities in which he wanders (174). It is also because Henry's febrile agitation, occasioned by his encounter with a Europe about which he had dreamed for years, endowed his inanimate surroundings with a living agency that enabled them, in a sense, to look at and even to speak to him. Overwhelmed by the sense of style conveyed to him by Paris, he felt as if "every low-browed vitrine" was expressing a "dark message" in a "sinister way": "Art, art, art, don't you see? Learn, little gaping pilgrims, what *that* is!" (191). Henry feels that he is caught and seen in the very act of looking and one can easily suppose that his "small scared consciousness" reacted in an even more intense way to the Galerie d'Apollon (198).

In the context of the autobiography, however, the nightmare becomes related to the unease that the author feels in directing the gaze upon his younger self and to the anxiety that renders his own body foreign to himself. In this text, the dream takes on the status of a founding myth, for it dramatizes an element of alterity that is continuously evoked by this act of narration, an element that must be avoided if the story is to be told, but which also threatens constantly to return. It shows us an anxiety that marks the encounter with what is unrepresentable and ties the latter inextricably with the difficulties of representing oneself.

In this nightmare, James depicts for us, in the same sentence, two logically distinct moments. As he notes, "The lucidity, not to say the sublimity, of the crisis had consisted in the great thought that I, in my appalled state, was probably still more appalling than the awful agent, creature or presence, whatever he was, whom I had guessed...to be making for my place of rest." The terms in which he describes his shadowy persecutor—an "awful agent, creature or

presence”—are words of a calculated vagueness; they do not endow this “visitant” with any particular characteristics and they suggest that the dreamer cannot know what sort of entity is pursuing him (197). Indeed, they are precisely not terms that would be used to describe an alter ego and they open up the possibility that this thing is not even human. What pursues the dreamer is something that, in a sense, stands just on the threshold of representation: the author cannot name what it is and cannot give it a specific description.

It is only in a separate, logically distinct moment—although it is to be found in the same sentence—that the dreamer confers upon this persecutor the status of a mirror image; imagining that this entity has all the same feelings that he does and that their roles are interchangeable, he can cease to be the pursued and can become the pursuer. The dream acts, then, to reduce the anxiety provoked by the sense of alterity; it does so precisely by reducing this sense of otherness and transforming it into something that resembles the dreamer.

In this scene, the elements of the uncanny that had been latent in James’s earlier formulations come to full fruition. What happens in the nightmare responds to the anxiety-provoking idea of rendering his own body unrecognizable by turning it inside-out and destroying its normal human aspect. The dream attempts to allay the anxiety brought by this idea; the threatening alterity is dispelled in this conversion of otherness into similitude. The dream constitutes a myth that gives the author a sense of “life-saving energy” and guarantees to him, even when the act of writing threatens him most strongly with a sense of self-estrangement, that the “danger” posed by this encounter with otherness can be overcome (196).

Yet in achieving this victory over anxiety, the dream also creates a curious ambivalence. The only way that James can defeat the figure is to identify with it and for this reason, its defeat is also his own; indeed, the state to which he reduces it is related to the procedure to which he subjects his younger self. To place the boy under the gaze and thus to catch him in his own little acts of looking and enjoying constantly runs the risk of making him seem small, trivial and

diminished. It is precisely this reduction that the entity is forced to undergo in the dream. Paul John Eakin has claimed that the dream “culminates in an act of self-display” in which the dreamer demonstrates his power to his antagonist, but it should be noted that there is never a confrontation in which these two figures look at each other face to face (81). Instead, the author describes the “retreat” of a “dimly-described figure,” who, after James opens the door, runs away and is seen at such a distance that he has been reduced to nothing more than a “diminished spot” (196, 197). What the dreamer sees is not an alter ego that would resemble something like a mirror image, a figure whose body would correspond closely to his own. Instead, the entity, having been reduced to little more than a small point, falls victim to the state of diminishment and reduction to which the system of vision that dominates the autobiography has always threatened to subject the small boy. The vanishing of this figure is one final consequence of a form that imposes on the subject the imperative of losing himself.

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