

# The Passion of Curiosity

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This essay will attempt to stage an encounter between literature and psychoanalysis; the ground of this encounter will be Henry James's story, "The Jolly Corner" and Sigmund Freud's discussion of a particular mode of negation—"disavowal"—which results in what he calls a "splitting of the ego." Spencer Brydon, the exile who has returned to his home, experiences one aspect of James's concern with the "global." Motivated by a "passion of... curiosity" concerning what he would have become had he remained in the United States, he searches for his *alter ego* in his family's home, the "jolly corner;" their encounter, however, does not at all reveal to him what he had expected (724). The profoundly enigmatic character of Brydon's relation with the *alter ego* can show how the mechanism of disavowal creates within consciousness a series of logical contradictions, each of which will be embodied in an aspect of the fantasmatic scenario of castration enacted within the text.

When "The Jolly Corner" is approached within the context of psychoanalysis, one of its puzzling aspects is precisely its presentation of the *alter ego*. This *alter ego*, this presence that Brydon is to encounter, would seem to be an instance of what has been called "the double." A classic early consideration of the role of the double in literary texts can be found in Sigmund Freud's essay, "The 'Uncanny'." Freud argues here that the double embodies "the old surmounted narcissism of earliest times," the archaic wishes that are no longer acceptable to the ego (236). To use different terms, in paradigmatic stories of doubling, something of the subject's desire can be made present and articulated, but on condition that it be negated. I can say something of what I want if I claim not to want it. This negated desire can then be located in my double and enacted by him/her. At the opening of his study, *The Double*, Otto Rank presents a perfect example of this sort of dual relation. In the silent film, *The Student of Prague*, the title character, having challenged his rival in love to a duel, promises his beloved that he will not kill him. While walking to the place where the duel is to be held, however, he encounters his double, who has just killed the rival (Rank, 13; "The Uncanny," 236). In contrast, "The Jolly Corner" presents not a negation but an avowal of an element of the main character's desire: a surprised Spencer Brydon confesses something of what he wants, rather than attributing it to his *alter ego*. After having left America "almost in the teeth of [his] father's curse" and having lived his life with his "back turned" away from any active

participation in the world of business, he now, at the age of fifty-five, discovers in himself a capacity to command and a certain enjoyment in his role as agent in the capitalist system. In the words of Alice Staverton, it is now apparent that “If he had but stayed at home he would have discovered his genius in time really to start some new variety of awful architectural here and run it till it burrowed in a gold-mine” (701).

Although Brydon does not deny what he wants, the use of negation is present and indeed prominent in the story. Negation is brought to bear not upon the statement of desire but upon the identity of the *alter ego* itself. Having sought to “wake into [...] ghostly life” an embodiment of what he would have become had he chosen to remain in the United States, Brydon, when he is finally confronted with such a presence, can do nothing other than to deny that it bears any relation to him (711). “[T]he presence before him was a presence, [b]ut [...] [s]uch an identity fitted his at *no* point” (725).

Such a statement is surprising, for it flies in the face of the expectations that the story has created up to this point. In the first part, Brydon announces that “I do want to see” the *alter ego*. “And I can. And I shall.” Logically, one would suppose that this project would culminate in one of two alternatives: either he will succeed or he will fail. That he would succeed in calling a supernatural being into existence but that, at the very moment of the confrontation, he would deny that it bears any relation to him is a much more puzzling turn of events.

This denial is all the more enigmatic since our expectations that Brydon would encounter something that resembles his own face have been carefully prepared by the scene itself, which is depicted as a series of unveilings; one screen after another is removed before the face is finally presented to us. The encounter with the first of these screens occurs just as Brydon is advancing toward the entrance to the house. The light of the dawn creates “a semicircular margin a cold silvery nimbus that seemed [...] to shift and expand and contract” and behind which he can begin to discern the presence taking form” (724). This “penumbra” of light, as he notes a moment later, soon becomes “the virtual screen of a figure which stood in it as still as some image erect in a niche” (724). The second screen is constituted a moment later, by the presence’s hands, which cover its face; one of them, as we are informed almost parenthetically, is marked by “two lost fingers, which were reduced to stumps, as if accidentally shot away” (725). Only after this careful preparation are we confronted by the face which, in contradiction of the expectations created by this careful preparation, is then claimed to have nothing to do with Brydon’s own.

This disclaiming of any similarity is also perplexing because the prose itself seems to resist it. Although Brydon tries to deny the resemblance as soon as he sees the face, the first words

that present this reaction seem, when taken in isolation, to assert his identity with this figure. “Horror, with the sight [of the face] had leaped into Brydon’s throat, gasping there in a sound he couldn’t utter; for the bared identity was too hideous as *his*, and his glare was the passion of his protest” (725). When one first reads this passage, the possessive pronoun, “his,” seems to refer to Brydon, as do the expressions, “his glare” and “his protest.” This statement seems to be asserting that he is recoiling in horror not because of his difference from the presence, but because their resemblance is too close; confronted with the presence standing before him, Brydon would seem to be seeing himself. Only in retrospect, at the end of this passage, when the appearance of the negation marks an unambiguous disavowal of any resemblance, can the reader make a different judgment. In the name of logical consistency, one can judge that “his,” in each of its occurrences, must refer to the presence, rather than to Brydon. Perhaps, however, this concern with logical consistency can lead us to understand too quickly what is taking place in this passage. Perhaps, indeed, what is crucial in this paragraph is precisely the appearance of a split: at the very moment that Brydon negates, with all the energy at his disposal, his kinship with the *alter ego*, something in the prose seems to affirm the identity of the two. If this is the case, then the reader of the passage is indeed confronted with a logical contradiction, one in which a single proposition is simultaneously affirmed and denied. The eruption of this contradiction will have far-reaching consequences in the story; it is an instance of what Freud, in his final writings, called the “splitting of the ego,” and will play a crucial role in the fantasmatic scenario that is in play here.

The concept of the splitting of the ego is an outgrowth and generalization of Freud’s considerations concerning fetishism. For Freud, “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and [...] does not want to give up;” fetishism is made possible by a very specific form of denial, one that Freud called *Verleugnung*, a term that has been rendered in the Standard Edition as “disavowal” (“Fetishism,” 152-3). In perceiving a girl’s genitals, a little boy simultaneously acknowledges and denies his perception that she does not possess a penis.

In his posthumously published *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud generalizes his thesis on disavowal; the latter term ceases to apply only to fetishism, taken in its narrowest and strictest sense, and becomes a much more general element of our everyday psychopathology. In Lacanian terms, this generalization can be said to rest upon a distinction between signifiers and perceptions. The signifier, a mental presentation attached to a drive can, if it is unacceptable to consciousness, undergo repression and be overtaken by amnesia. A perception, even if it is every bit as disturbing and unacceptable as the signifier, cannot be repressed; instead, whenever

consciousness “finds itself in the position of fending off some demand from the external world which it finds distressing,” it can do so “by means of a *disavowal* of the perceptions which bring to knowledge this demand from reality” (204).

This disavowal is not complete, for the perception is simultaneously accepted and cast into doubt; the persistence of these two attitudes side by side constitutes the phenomenon that Freud calls the “splitting of the ego” (204). With repression, if a particular signifier contradicts an element of our consciousness, it can be made to disappear. Disavowal, on the other hand, does not avail itself of the mechanism of repression; the two contradictory elements engendered by the simultaneous acceptance and denial of the perception remain starkly and explicitly present to consciousness.

As an example of this generalized disavowal, Freud recounts to us an incident from his own experience, in his essay of 1936, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.” In this text, Freud, at the age of eighty, analyzes an incident that had occurred when he was forty-eight. Vacationing in Athens, he stands before the Acropolis and experiences an uncanny sensation. What occurs, as he tries to reconstruct it later, is that “I had [...] a momentary feeling: *What I see here is not real*” (244). Since, however, Freud cannot deny absolutely the evidence of his perceptions, he transposes this doubt into the past and imagines a situation that had never, in fact, been the case: that as a young student, he had doubted the existence of this monument. The result is a dramatic split within his own conscious ideas. As he says, a “surprising thought suddenly entered my mind: ‘So all this really *does* exist, just we learnt at school!’” (241). At the moment when this idea appears

the person who gave expression to this remark was divided [...] from another person who took cognizance of the remark and both were astonished, though not by the same thing. The first behaved as though he were obliged, under the impact of an unequivocal observation, to believe in something the reality of which had hitherto seemed doubtful. . . . The second person, on the other hand, was justifiably astonished, because he had been unaware that the real existence of Athens, the Acropolis, and the landscape around it had ever been objects of doubt. (241)

In Freud’s experience, the attempt to disavow a perception leads to a logical contradiction: as a child, he both did and did not deny the existence of the Acropolis. Similarly, in “The Jolly Corner,” Spencer Brydon both denies and affirms that the presence before him is his *alter ego*. The identification of the psychic mechanism that seems to be at work in these two texts raises, however, more questions than it answers. What, precisely, would trigger such a disavowal? What is to be gained by precipitating a logical contradiction within consciousness? In asking

these questions, we encounter something of a hole in psychoanalytic theory, where the concept of disavowal has not benefited from a thorough elaboration.

Freud's attempt to explain what happened to him in Athens is not altogether satisfactory. He recognizes that in seeing the Acropolis, he is not only accomplishing a childhood wish, but also, from the perspective of his own childhood, playing the part of a great hero. "When first one catches sight of the sea, crosses the ocean and experiences as realities cities and lands which for so long had been distant, unattainable things of desire—one feels oneself like a hero who has performed deeds of improbable greatness." In having reached the Acropolis, Freud compares himself with Napoleon, who "during his coronation [...] turned to one of his brothers [...] and remarked: 'What would *Monsieur notre Père* have said to this, if he could have been here to-day?'" (247) It is here that Freud locates his motive in disavowing his perception; in seeing the Acropolis, he is showing that he has become more successful than his father ever was. What he finally realizes is that, as a schoolboy, he had never doubted the existence of this monument; instead, he had doubted that he—since he came from a family with limited financial means—would ever have the chance to see it. In achieving his wish now, he is overreaching his position in relation to his father, and is thus incurring the danger of punishment by the superego; for this reason, he disavows his perception.

This explanation contains a serious weakness: it does not show why the relatively mysterious mechanism of disavowal, rather than the much more thoroughly explored process of repression, was necessary in this case. Why, in standing before this monument, could Freud not have repressed quite thoroughly his childhood thoughts connected with it? Could he not simply have forgotten the criticism of his father that such thoughts had implied? Why is the denial of a perception the necessary response both for Freud and in James's story?

A speculative answer to such questions would involve examining the particular characteristics of the visual field to which the act of disavowal responds. The relation to vision that is found in both of these texts resembles fetishism in terms of the way in which this field is constructed, but differs from it radically in its subjective effects. In his seminar, *La relation d'objet*, Jacques Lacan argues that the fetish is constructed in terms of the setting-up of a screen, a curtain behind which the subject can imagine the object that masks his fear of his own castration (155-6).

His later discussion of vision in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* accomplishes a surprising rethinking of this schema, a rethinking that both generalizes and subverts the fetish. This generalization also locates an object behind a screen, although the object, in this case, is the gaze, a form of the object *a*: The gaze, unlike the fetish, is located at

the foundation of the field of the visible, for Lacan approaches the latter in terms of geometrical optics. The gaze is a point; instead of possessing an empirical, tangible existence, it is an abstract place that has neither length nor breadth. The correlate of the gaze is the subject, which is also a point. Analyzing the scheme upon which perspective in painting is founded, Lacan locates the subject at the point in the viewer's eye where all the lines of light converge and the object, in turn, is located at the vanishing point, the place in the painting where all the lines come together (91, 106).

Although the gaze, as such, cannot be apprehended, the subject can, from time to time, imagine that he senses something that inhabits that space. To cite an example that Lacan uses, a voyeur, peeping through a keyhole, suddenly imagines that somewhere, in the distance, he is being seen (84). Although the gaze is based upon the schema of the fetish, its effect is radically different. The man who is trapped by the gaze does not use it to deny his castration; instead, this object pierces to the heart of his own emptiness and reveals the void within him.

One can speculate that generalized disavowal—which is not linked with fetishism—bears upon this imagined gaze. Freud, looking with fascination at a sight that he had hoped to see all his life, experiences a moment when it seems as if something is looking back at him, something that can be imagined at the point where all the lines of light converge. This object looking back at him, catching him in his moment of triumph, would have the potential to devastate him, to empty him, presumably as a punishment for the wish to surpass his father. If such is the case, then disavowal can be conceived as a form of defense against the imperceptible object that lies beyond the field of vision, the object that, if recognized in its power to castrate, could, for a moment, annihilate us.

Something similar is at work in “The Jolly Corner,” when Spencer Brydon at last confronts his *alter ego*. This text plays upon the reader's fascination with vision, arousing the impulse to try to discern what seems to lie just beyond the screen. Indeed, it even suggests, at one point, that the *alter ego* is itself a sort of screen, behind which there stands something else, something that has a libidinal value for the subject. When Brydon first sees the figure, it strikes him as resembling a “black-vizored sentinel guarding a treasure” (724). The treasure itself, however, is never seen. Behind the *alter ego* is something else, something valuable that is only imagined; this vaguely sensed object inhabits the place of the gaze as object *a*.

Such an object would function here not to allow the subject to deny castration but, instead, to lay bare his lack. Brydon, confronted finally with his *alter ego*, seems to disavow it precisely because it is also the location of the gaze, the uncanny force of which he cannot bring himself to recognize. Indeed, as the bearer of this gaze, this presence becomes much more than the

counterpart for whom Brydon had been searching; it also becomes the place of the castrating power that is attributed to the father, the figure who had cursed him for his abandonment of America. The presence that advances toward Brydon enacts a fantasy of castration; this figure is endowed with “the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed,” and Brydon can do nothing other than to submit to it. Accordingly he quite literally fades—loses consciousness—as the presence advances upon him.

This fantasmatic staging of castration, when taken together with the commentaries that will be made on it in the final pages of the story, is, in one sense, quite different from the more usual manner in which the presentation of a fantasy unfolds; the strategy of disavowal and splitting will allow very different aspects of the fantasy to exist side by side. In his paradigmatic text on the fantasy, “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud argues that the kernel of a fantasy is a series of transformations; these incompatible enactments, however, exist on very different levels and are formulated at different moments. He notes that a number of his analysands had told him of a masturbatory daydream, which seems to be distinguished by its utter lack of specificity: “A child is being beaten” (179). After a period of analytic work, the analysand is able to make the scene more specific: “My father is beating the child whom I hate” (185). Freud hypothesizes, however, that behind these two formulations lies a third, which “has never succeeded in becoming conscious,” and can only be constructed: “I am being beaten by my father” (185).

What distinguishes the fantasmatic castration scenario of “The Jolly Corner” from “A Child is Being Beaten” is that James’s story allows radically different versions of a single scene to coexist in consciousness. The splitting that marks James’s story—that between Brydon’s denial and the affirmation lodged within the movement of the prose itself—permits the development of two radically different versions of the same scene. Each will arise quite logically from the two contradictory premises. In both cases, the text is attempting to raise and answer a question. This question is not whether or not the subject must be castrated, for castration—fortunately—is assumed here to be necessary and inevitable. The question, instead, concerns the character of the Other who is responsible for the castrated state in which Spencer Brydon finds himself, and especially the question of whether this Other derives a sadistic jouissance from the act. “The Jolly Corner” is a meditation upon this Other, for the story manifests the possible responses that can be brought to the following proposition: *X enjoys castrating me*.

If the subject’s castration itself cannot be negated, there are two other elements in this proposition that can be: X, the identity of the castrator; and the verb “enjoys,” which concerns the jouissance of the agent of this act. In the scene of the encounter, the first of these elements is negated: it is not X who is enjoying his castration. Confronted with “the face of a stranger,”

he can believe that the force that “advances as for aggression” has nothing to do with his own life or with the family that had lived in the jolly corner (721). If the Other’s enjoyment has to be contemplated, then at least the Other in question can be one who has as little to do with Brydon as possible.

This first negation is not, however, the only one that will be introduced into the statement of the fantasy; in the final section, Alice Staverton will give voice to some of the consequences of the supposition that the presence was indeed the *alter ego*. The next day, she tells Brydon that, at the very moment of the encounter, the *alter ego* had also appeared to her. “In the cold dim dawn of this morning [...] [h]e came back to me. . . . And when this morning I again saw I knew it would be because you had—and also then, from the first moment, because you somehow wanted me” (729, 730). In telling this story, she allows the second, rather than the first element of the proposition to be negated: X does *not* enjoy castrating me. A presence who can give such a sign to Alice Staverton is not one who—in spite of his aggressive actions—can be convicted of having a fundamentally malevolent intention.

In this way, the kernel of inconsistency introduced by the experience of splitting gives rise to two logically incompatible negations of the same proposition. Despite their contradictory character, the two seem to coexist in relative peace at the end of the story. Brydon’s initial sense of his radical difference from his *alter ego* never quite seems to disappear. It can be doubted that Alice Staverton’s suggestion that there is a kinship between the two really presents Brydon, once and for all, with an utterly “proved identity” (731). Instead, the two propositions seem to exist alongside each other; by providing two different negations of the threatening elements in the scenario, they furnish the subject with two places of refuge.

The coexistence of these mutually exclusive propositions recalls a story that Freud tells in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in a context that has nothing to do with the issue of disavowal. According to this anecdote, a man was

charged by one of his neighbours with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted, first that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed the kettle from his neighbour at all. (120)

As Freud notes, any one of these assertions would have sufficed; when taken together, they destroy the defendant’s case. In “The Jolly Corner,” on the other hand, this coexistence of propositions intended to ward off anxiety has the opposite effect. It seems to allow for the remarkable sense of liberation of the conclusion, which views the relations between men and women in a light that is far more optimistic than is usual in James.



Another consequence of this use of fantasy, however, is that the intense curiosity of which Spencer Brydon had been so proud must now be understood in quite a different way. At the very moments when he believed most strongly that he was animated by a determination to know, he was, instead—like all of us—motivated by a will to know nothing about his greatest fear: that the agent of castration derives *jouissance* from his act. The passion of curiosity reveals itself to be a passion for ignorance.[1]

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[1] In *The Trials of Curiosity*, Ross Posnock applies to the James siblings Freud's discussion, in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, of the various fates of childhood sexual research, a research that works upon the same sort of fantasmatic scenarios that haunt Spencer Brydon. He suggests that William embodies one of the failed outcomes of the latter, obsessional brooding, whereas Henry's "unbounded" curiosity is, like Leonardo's, a successful sublimation of infantile sexual research. I would argue, on the contrary, that any exemplification of curiosity is built upon the foundation of a passion for ignorance, and that Henry is the novelist par excellence of obsessional brooding. See Posnock, 47.