

“OH, GIGANTIC PARADOX, TOO UTTERLY MONSTROUS FOR SOLUTION!”

Charlotte Broad

A man’s soul may be in his shadow, in his reflection in water or a mirror, or in his portrait. Thus, Sir George Frazer tells us that “the reflection-soul, being external to the man, is exposed to much the same dangers as the shadow-soul”. In the Bank Islands, on the one hand, certain long-shaped stones, known as ‘eating ghosts’, supposedly had the power to draw a man’s soul out of him if his shadow fell on the stone.¹ The Aztecs, on the other hand, would keep sorcerers out of the house by leaving “a vessel of water with a knife in it behind the door”. If a sorcerer attempted to enter the house, he would be so alarmed by the sight of his reflection transfixed by a knife that he would flee. The Greeks considered it an omen of death to see one’s reflection in water, which possibly accounts for the myth of the beautiful Narcissus. Furthermore, primitive people even today fear the camera, believing their souls may be taken away in the portrait: in former times, Frazer reminds us, no Siamese coins were ever stamped with the image of the King since there was a ‘prejudice’ against making portraits in any medium.²

¹ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 250-253.

² Sir James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, pp. 159-160. Under the section entitled ‘Taboos and the Perils of the Soul’ in *The New Golden Bough*, Sir George Frazer offers many interesting illustrations of primitive beliefs concerning the spiritual dangers that may beset the soul. Nevertheless, the editor of this abridged edition, Theodor H. Gaster, does point out that Frazer’s assertion that primitive people believe in a separable or external soul, which leaves the body during sleep, sickness or stress, or may be extracted by magical means, is gravely misleading. Gaster establishes a distinction between the soul —“that is, the entire psychic side of the self”— and “consciousness”. He confirms that these peoples really believe in the detachment of “something far nearer what we should call consciousness”; thus, “what a man is then thought to lose is the normal control of his faculties, not his ‘spiritual’ being or vitality”. Frazer —and many later anthropologists—further confuses the issue when he maintains that primitive man believes in the individual possession of several souls. In Gaster’s opinion, it is not so much a question of quantity but “that the total self is a complex

Against this background of popular belief, man's essence has fascinated him since earliest times and the possibilities of interpretation are infinite. For this reason, the rendering of the double motif in fiction, which centres around the mysterious development of man's consciousness, is perhaps one of the richest and most intriguing in literature. The writer's intimate involvement in the various expressions of this human dilemma pervades his work at every level and leaves an indelible mark upon it. The exploration of the theme undertaken in European Romantic fiction bears a definite analogy with C.H. Hinton's remark:

... in our world there [is] for each man somewhere a counter man ... a real counterfeit, outwardly fashioned like himself, but with his right hand opposite his original's right hand. Exactly like the image of the man in a mirror. And when the man and his counterfeit meet, a sudden whirl, a blaze, a little steam, and the two human beings, having mutually unwound each other, leave nothing but a residuum of formless particles.³

We may note this clearly in Dostoevsky's *The Double* and Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson", where the protagonist and his 'twin', reflecting an undesirable counterfeit, travel on parallel paths, to the protagonist's wonder and distress, and then converge in violent opposition which leads to the 'undoing' of both. The agonizing inner struggle of both Golyadkin and William Wilson cannot help but cause anxiety in the reader as each, by delving into the unknown strata of human consciousness, becomes not only entrapped by his 'counterfeit' but also further alienated from his society.

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde emphasizes this impression of isolation and imprisonment. The protagonist, embodying eternal youth and beauty, is a record of the past while his portrait reveals his ageing and soiled conscience. Blinded by his own vanity, Gray destroys the portrait, thereby transferring his 'record' to posterity and dying "withered, wrinkled and loathsome of visage".⁴

of several different spiritual elements—a notion which we ourselves endorse" when we speak of character, personality, individuality, identity, temper and sensibility. Gaster exemplifies his clarification by pointing out the multiple psychic elements in man denoted by the ancient Egyptians (for example, the 'ka', the 'ba', the 'ab' among others). Gaster does not wish to deny primitive belief, but rather hopes to clarify Frazer's interpretation of this belief, which is illuminating in the context of the present study, since both William Wilson, in "William Wilson", and Spencer Brydon, in "The Jolly Corner", are haunted by a 'second self' that, although it apparently appears as a separate entity, forms part of each protagonist. In this context, we are concerned with a "divided consciousness", perhaps motivated by popular belief and man's concern to establish harmony and equilibrium in his society—a reflection of the self. Primitive people find means to overcome this fear of the divided self, but literary expressions of this theme reveal the undeniable truth: there is no way in which we can honestly avoid our 'second self' (p. 217).

³ Strother B. Purdy, *The Hole in the Fabric*, p. 142.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 234.

Henry James's short story, "The Jolly Corner", written later than these works, alters the classical pattern and offers a certain optimism. The protagonist, Spencer Brydon, is saved through a series of coincidences from the immediate aggression and danger of his materialistic self which he has consciously evoked. "William Wilson" and "The Jolly Corner", even though the former was written towards the beginning of the nineteenth century and the latter towards the end, share many points in common, partly because their creators insist so much on the conscious and imaginative faculties of each protagonist. However, they portray one outstanding difference: Brydon is saved, notably by a woman, whereas Wilson is condemned when he tries to form a secret liaison with a woman. I shall explore these two tales in an attempt to discover why they end so differently. Firstly, however, I shall point out several interesting similarities between these two tales which may act as background material. Furthermore, since these two writers had such definite ideas about fiction, I shall consider several aspects which reflect and intensify the complexity of the central theme and make each tale such compelling reading.

Dostoevsky in *The Double* introduces an independent individual — a variation on Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde — which opposes the protagonist. However, in "William Wilson" and "The Jolly Corner" we are faced with a 'second self' which may be termed what Rank calls the "mysterious unknown",⁵ that is, neither of these doubles is visible to other people. Each man undertakes a solitary struggle with a faceless presence and, in the case of Brydon, an immaterial presence who only opens and closes doors. Wilson emphasizes throughout the effect of his imagination, 'fancy', upon his thoughts since he is "the descendant of a race [of] imaginative and easily excitable temperament".⁶ Although we are left in no doubt about his fate, we can never be certain, despite the detailed physical description of his double, William Wilson II*, at school, whether such an individual actually existed in his adult life. Spencer Brydon's search for what he would have been had he stayed in New York — rather than going to Europe as he did — is on a very conscious level as he undertakes to evoke this 'other' in his childhood home at the jolly corner. It takes the form of a horrifying mental exercise as he "projected himself all day ... over the bristling line of hard unconscious heads and into the other, the real, the waiting life" at jolly corner.⁷ "He knew what he meant and what he wanted" (TJC, 336); this very knowledge contrasts distinctly with Wilson's wild imagination as the former tracks down his double and the latter is pursued. Central to their struggle is the exertion of 'mind over matter'. Wilson, who in childhood days had dominated his double, later succumbs to II's 'arbitrary will', but, eventually, on the verge of madness, gathers

⁵ Otto Rank, *The Double*, p. 10.

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings*, p. 159. All quotations from "William Wilson" will be taken from this edition and the page numbers will be placed within parentheses in the body of the text.

⁷ Henry James, *Selected Short Stories*, p. 335. All quotations will be taken from this edition and the page numbers will be placed within parentheses in the body of the text.

* I shall use the 'II' when referring to the double throughout this study.

strength to confront his rival. Brydon, meanwhile, has to exercise great will-power in the face of his adversary in order to satiate his curiosity. In classical style, their curiosity leads to their 'undoing', but not without a battle of wills.

This emphasis upon the imaginative and mental faculties of our protagonists brings to mind a remark Simone de Beauvoir made when she claimed one could create a double "through inward dialogue".⁸ Both Wilson and Brydon are essentially bored by their society; Wilson rebels against it stressing his unique wickedness and independence only to be thwarted by II, while Brydon is definitely at odds with his materialistic compatriots. They both, therefore, look inward, and their alienation from their fellow man leads inevitably to this "inward dialogue", where they discover such a violent contrast to their outward image.

The presence of this 'other' has haunted each since infancy and both cling intimately to their childhood memories. Wilson met and knew his rival during his school days and, upon reflection, cannot fail to "recognize the William Wilson of my school days" (WW, 176) in the impostor who so persistently interferes with his will. Brydon returns to the scene of his youth and precisely this setting urges him to evoke the image of what he might have been and become. Beauvoir continues to say that her women (but it would just as well apply to men) felt more independent under parental protection; they had their future before them. Just a brief glance at these two tales shows the truth of this statement, since Wilson claimed he became his own master at an early age and Brydon recalls that while he was too young to realize what he was doing, he left for Europe against his father's wishes. Therefore, "once they were out to conquer the world, now they are reduced to generality".⁹ Both our protagonists fear this fate, desperately preserving their precious individuality, while recalling their childhood days with fondness.

In Poe's conclusion to "Eureka" he claims existence is "a normal and unquestionable condition" up to Manhood; "But now comes the period at which a conventional World Reason awakens us from the truth of our dream. Doubt, Surprise and Incomprehensibility arrive at the same moment".¹⁰ These emotions are clearly marked in both tales as the protagonists try to rationalize the existence of II. When Wilson becomes truly aware of the reflected identity, he leaves the school taking a ritualistic step into Manhood through the foreboding gates in which "a plenitude of mystery — a world of matter for solemn remark, or for solemn meditation" could be found (WW, 160). He begins to understand why II had aroused such a "world of uneasy curiosity" in his mind and this questioning doubt persists as the whisper haunts him throughout the tale. Brydon awakens from his "perverse young course — and almost in the teeth of my father's curse" when he is forced to face the harsh reality of the growing industrial nation around him (TJC,

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 644.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 645.

¹⁰ Quoted in the "Introduction" written by David Galloway to *Selected Writings* by Edgar Allan Poe, p. 46.

331). "He scarce knew what to make of this lively stir, in a compartment of his mind never yet penetrated, of a capacity for business and a sense of construction", the narrator points out when Brydon joins in the construction of an apartment building where his property had formerly stood (TJC, 323). Brydon, against his principles, is enjoying this change of events and longs to find out if he would have been a success if he had stayed. He senses he blighted "a small tiny bud" (TJC, 331) inside him upon changing climate, and, despite the warning of Alice Staverton (his childhood friend and only companion) that "it would have been quite splendid, quite huge and monstrous" (TJC, 331), he will evoke this presence. At this stage he claims he knows "at least what I am" and, almost in the same breath, that "*He* isn't myself. He's the just so totally other person" (TJC, 333). His doubt is firmly established. What a shock is in store for such a logical mind when he is truly surprised by the 'other' and simply cannot comprehend its meaning. As it is, his "vain egoism" has blinded him.

Our protagonists, so fully aware of their mental and imaginative capacity, begin to delve into and become involved in the mystery of this gigantic paradox of a divided consciousness which has so haunted them since childhood and is now forcing them to question their existence. Bearing this background in mind, let us now examine their reactions in the context of the object of their obsession so as to reveal its effect upon them which leads each story to such a different conclusion. A detailed examination would, unfortunately, cover more pages than Brydon's questing and therefore this brief analysis can only be offered as a guide to the many possible points of interest. I should just like to point out in passing that even though Wilson's association with his double covers a period of years and Brydon only meets his 'other' once, the stages within this intense meeting bear an uncanny resemblance to those of Wilson.

A second William Wilson —same name and birthdate— first appears at Dr. Bransby's school. He resembles his namesake not only in physique but also in temperament to a certain extent and the two bear "many points of congeniality in temper" (WW, 164). This leads to the formation of a secret love/hate relationship —visible only to them as the first-person narrator, Wilson, informs us; Wilson maliciously attacks II's one weakness of not being able to speak above a whisper and II retaliates most effectively by enunciating his tormentor's name —venom to our proud protagonist— and by imitating him to the smallest detail. Although II alone rebels against and interferes with the will of the child despot, Wilson, he is apparently motivated solely by the "whimsical desire to thwart, astonish or mortify myself" (WW, 163). II is a great source of embarrassment to Wilson, since he cannot even feel that his double is worthy of him as II is "destitute alike of the ambition which urged, and of the passionate energy of mind which enabled me to excel" (WW, 163). Therefore, while the despot's victories in quarrels with his rival were inevitable, they were always tinted with a sense of guilt and an uneasy feeling that his double deserved to win. Wilson's antagonism grows, as, he confesses, does his fear, towards this 'patronizing' and 'protective' classmate until he can no longer stand his "intolerable arrogance". He sneaks into his rival's room one night, lamp in

hand, to carry out a particularly wicked practical joke and is filled with horror as the light, shining on II's face, presents his identical reflection. In utter confusion he extinguishes the lamp —his light of knowledge— and leaves the academy.

Wilson has had to admit that II's moral sense at school "was far keener than my own", and that if he had paid attention to the counsel embodied in his whisper, he would have been a happier and better man (WW, 167). Therefore, we may suggest that this childhood likeness represents Wilson's better half and his conscience. He soon erases the reality of these years smiling "at the vivid force of the imagination which I hereditarily possessed" as his subsequent degenerate life at Eton "washed away all but the froth of my past hours" (WW, 169). However, a stranger, apparently identical to him although he cannot see his face, appears at a wild party Wilson throws at Eton. As he whispers 'William Wilson' in Wilson's ear, brandishing an admonishing finger, the key of these "whispered syllables" evokes a sensation he had once felt at Dr. Bransby's academy "of wild, confused and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn" (WW, 167). Upon enquiring into the identity of this Wilson the only fact he discovers is that his childhood namesake inexplicably left the academy the same day as he had. The admonition has no lasting effect upon Wilson, however. He reaches further into the dens of iniquity during his scandalous life at Oxford and is finally utterly humiliated when a stranger exposes him, in total darkness, as a card cheat in his "never-to-be-forgotten whisper which thrilled to the very marrow of my bones" (WW, 173). "All virtue dropped bodily as a mantle" he recalls in retrospect; this is symbolized by the stranger's cloak, identical to his own, which Preston hands him as he asks him to leave his chambers.

Wilson and the 'agent of his shame' are definitely travelling on parallel paths. The degenerate Wilson flees to Europe "in perfect agony of horror and of shame" (WW, 175). But, as he mentions, "I fled in vain". He is heartlessly pursued by his supervisor who thwarts him in every evil act and Wilson is obliged to dig more deeply into the significance of the tormentor's purpose. The tables have turned: II now dominates in the struggle for power and Wilson suffers. The more victimized Wilson feels the deeper he sinks into a life of degeneracy. Despite the admonishing finger he inflicts more evil, like Dorian Gray who sees the visible evidence of his cruelty reflected in his portrait. Finally, as at school, he gains the strength, through II's relentless persecution, to confront this righteous presence. Bordering on insanity, he challenges the stranger, identically dressed, to a duel at a *masked* ball. The light of knowledge now shines as he discovers the truth. His opponent, staggering towards him "pale and dabbled in blood" (WW, 178), embodies an identical reflection of his own image, the Wilson of his school days: his conscience.

In this moment of convergence we realize the negative effect Wilson's double has had upon him. He has been completely blinded to a wealth of knowledge offered him in their first encounter. Until this incident, he had truly extinguished the light and his one-tracked degenerate and utterly selfish life had brought about his 'undoing'. He has treated II as an outside 'impostor' and in this vain reassertion of his will he has left no space for repentance. As II says "in the agonies of his

dissolution”: “Yet hence forward art thou also dead —dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! ...” (WW, 178). As an unrepentant soul, he has been forced by his double —which is, after all, himself— to the life of a solitary outcast, as he himself says at the beginning:

Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned! —to the earth art thou not forever dead? to its honors, to its flowers, to its golden aspirations?— and a cloud, dense, dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven? (WW, 158)

Just as Wilson’s life draws to its inevitable close along a narrow and agonizing track, ending in the confines of a bolted antichamber, Brydon’s life opens up before him. An important difference between the two works may be indicated here: Brydon, we may suggest mainly on account of his relationship with Alice Staverton, is offered the opportunity to choose his fate. When he sees the door closed he knows he may push it or not, think rather than act. His adversary’s second challenge —now an open door (leading to new knowledge?)— makes him realize that his stand against his foe may lead either to liberation or “supreme defeat” (TJC, 349). His enemy may close or open his vistas, but it is up to Brydon to choose. Wilson, however, is merely driven by the desire “no longer to be enslaved” by this conscience (WW, 177).

Therefore, we note that the obsession with a presence takes a different form in each protagonist’s mind: the power of imagination and lack of objectivity blinded Wilson to a possible alternative, whereas Brydon considers his search for this ‘other’ as a “cultivation” of his whole perception. This idea may be observed at many moments during his quest. The impression of the “proudest duplication of consciousness” alerts “terror and applause” within him; unlike Wilson, who also fears his double, he is pleased that his ‘other self’ is worthy of him. Brydon’s struggle takes the form of a “concentrated conscious combat” where he needs to hold on like a man “slipping and slipping on some awful incline” (TJC, 340). Only in retrospect does Wilson become aware of the terrifying way reality has slipped away from him; his obsession only allowed him to perceive his evil self which he enjoyed so much. Brydon determines, therefore, to face his trial despite the “collective negation” he senses —comparable perhaps to the stony silence with which Wilson’s fraud was received at Oxford. On account of his extraordinary perception, Brydon is prepared not only to ‘spare’ the challenging presence but also to surrender. He considers “we both of us should have suffered”, but now firmly tells this ‘other’ to leave him alone (TJC, 345). He is tempted to flee since all the vistas are not now clear and he senses danger. Oh, what objectivity compared with Wilson’s insane and confused drive towards destruction. Brydon, knowing he can destroy the house and its ghosts, even perceives a “nobleness” in this sacrifice. As he descends from the upper floor in fear, he takes refuge in his childhood memories —paradoxically Wilson recalls his with delight, but they haunt him horribly— and creates a “scale of space again inordinate” (TJC, 348) within which to move. While Brydon creates space Wilson’s boundaries are more and more limited by his obsession.

Gradually Brydon is forced to centre his attention upon his second self by his eyes, “the two opposed projections of him in presence”, despite his attempt to remain ‘sightless’ (TJC, 343). The truth is only revealed to Wilson in his ruthless and futile vengeance. In his convergence with his adversary Brydon experiences a “horror and revulsion” towards this image “of his own substance and stature”, which may remind us of Golyadkin Sr in Dostoevsky’s work, *The Double* (TJC, 310). Both somehow feel cheated by their double’s “inscrutable manoeuvres”. Brydon gapes at this portrait as Wilson had at his mirror-reflection. His double possesses a double eyeglass and has two mutilated fingers whereas Wilson’s reflection is covered with blood, which so appropriately symbolises his absolute defeat. While Wilson personifies his double on account of all his childhood knowledge of his namesake, Brydon’s portrait, like that of Dorian Gray, although having an intense individuality, remains immaterial. Brydon had no knowledge of this image and would rather not have any.

In the convergence of the two selves, both Brydon and Golyadkin are cushioned into a certain false security. Brydon feels triumphant since his antagonist’s face is covered and Golyadkin senses such affection around him that he is blinded to his inevitable doom. In this respect Wilson was offered a choice to repent since he could never make out his protector’s facial features. However, all three in their various ways are overcome by the aggression of their reflected images: the ‘stranger’ as they each call him. Of the three only Brydon is offered the choice to deny the “bared identity [that] was too hideous as his” as he gives way under “the hot breath and roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed ...” (TJC, 351). This almost physical presence has finally foxed his logical mind and a soul is revealed to him in its monstrosity: “such an identity (an image of which he had borne in his mind since before his quest) fitted his at *no* point” (TJC, 351). Wilson had had to stand the harsh judgement and truth in the final words his opponent had uttered, but for Brydon the trial is over.

While Wilson is committed to a life of self-recrimination and isolation, Brydon is offered the chance of rebirth and new knowledge through his intimate and secret relationship with Alice Staverton, who had also acquired a knowledge of this immaterial presence in her dreams. Our poor tortured Wilson could only establish a “secret communion” with his spirit and an intimate relationship with his double who foiled any other attempt to make a union. This relationship from the past links Brydon with the future and gives him strength to encounter his vision to the point of risking his own life, just as the intimacy of his childhood memories of the black and white tiles had supported him in his moments of crisis. This determination to meet this other self, if only to annihilate him, points to another important difference—and implies a series of other differences— between the two tales: Wilson has no future, no redemption.

He, like Brydon, has been self-centred, extraordinarily vain—note how he designed his own fashionable clothes—and has led a frivolous life. Both have been the centre of their own universe and therefore find it difficult to see beyond themselves: Brydon simply refuses to accept his own projection even when he sees

it. However, his future is secured through the understanding of his female companion, to whom he has been able to cling selfishly throughout his battle. Wilson has nobody. His isolation is absolute.

Fromm states that the “awareness of human separation” without reunion by love is the source of all shame and anxiety.¹¹ Both protagonists refer to their doubles as the ‘agent of their shame’. Otto Rank, however, claimed that in these tales concerned with the double-motif the “catastrophe (generally) occurs in the relationship with a woman ...”.¹² Wilson’s attempt to seduce his host’s charming young wife does indeed cause his catastrophic encounter with his double. He has lost all chance of a ‘reunion by love’ and must live with the anguish of ‘human separation’. This summarizes the basic difference between the two tales. Alice Staverton, by loving and saving Brydon, has offered him a chance to meet his monstrous soul and the opportunity to learn to love. At last Brydon expresses a more selfless affection (so brilliantly contrasted by the narrator with a selfish idea): “He has a million a year ... But he hasn’t you” (TJC, 357).

Thus we may conclude that neither double reflects a truth the protagonist willingly accepts. Wilson has passed blindly through the multiplication of doors—to borrow a metaphor from “The Jolly Corner”—and is drawn magnetically towards the final room that has no exit. Here he must dwell in solitude until death, whose “shadow ... has thrown a softening influence over my spirit” (WW, 158), relieves him. The choice offered to Brydon, on the other hand, has allowed him to return from the “uttermost end of an interminable gray passage”—Wilson’s dim valley and the fated home of most nineteenth century tales dealing with this motif—both to reach a new, deeper perception of the meaning of life and to embrace human love and understanding (TJC, 352).

Henry James, one of the master craftsmen in the art of fiction, claimed he never wrote a word that did not contribute to the overall comprehension of his work; for this reason he was so opposed to the English novelist, who, in his opinion, constantly digressed from the central theme of the work. Poe had argued that the work of art was an integral and self-contained fact, embodying “everything necessary for its understanding”.¹³ Apart from a sense of ambiguity which I shall touch on later, this is especially true of these two tales, where a tapestry of elements are delicately interwoven to intensify, enrich and reinforce the central double-motif. The writer’s involvement in his theme is all too apparent, although the approach is not so complex as that of Dostoevsky. At this stage I can only afford to briefly point out a few characteristics, which may help us as we delve further into the study of the double-motif.

Both authors intensify the central theme by introducing a wealth of contrast,

¹¹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 7.

¹² Otto Rank, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹³ Quoted in the “Introduction” written by David Galloway to *Selected Writings* by Edgar Allan Poe, p. 41.

wich reflects each 'self'. Wilson and Brydon both deal with the outside world during the day and discover the mystery of the unknown at night. The harsh reality of industrialism is contrasted with the intimacy of the night walks in the house at jolly corner, where the darkness of hidden recesses obscures the hidden truth. Similarly, Wilson is popular among his peers and only at night does he encounter his strange counsellor. This is linked with the idea of the natural and the supernatural. Both doubles take on a supernatural —also 'unnatural' in Brydon's case— quality and the atmosphere created around them leads us far from reality. Good and evil define the moral boundaries: Wilson's double foils him in his mischief while Brydon's evoked image of the monstrous portrait with mutilated fingers assured him, maybe, of his own value. Certainly, Alice stands out as the epitome of sanctity surrounded by wickedness. Both writers balance emotions such as fear and delight, love and hatred, greed and abstinence, a sense of freedom and imprisonment. The protagonists' dependence upon their senses is marked. In each case a sense reflects the double: sound (the whisper) in "William Wilson" and sight (the two eyes) in "The Jolly Corner". These are inevitably contrasted with their other senses and sensations around this predominant sense.

Another definite double in each tale makes the central double's significance more explicit. Dr. Bransby, the cruel sadistic principal, is also the local pastor; truly a gigantic paradox. Brydon returns to New York as the proud owner of two properties: one ugly building which he immediately turns into an apartment building, and the house at jolly corner, the cradle of his sentiment. Only under the threat of the double's overwhelming presence is he prepared to demolish this treasure. Alice's role further complicates the theme in "The Jolly Corner". This "pressed flower", who had the guts to stay in New York, follow her career and remain unmarked by the evolution around her, is opposed to the man who flees from home and to the 'other' who stayed in New York; yet, she is united with Brydon's home at jolly corner. Again we note the link between past, present and future times embodied in this constant of which Brydon is the variable.

The labyrinthal description, so notable in the streets of New York and in the house at jolly corner, Wilson's school and its dormitories, emphasize the complexity of the mental and imaginative exploration of each protagonist. Wilson's desperate struggle to wind his way through the crowd at the masked ball leads him to the final confrontation with his double. The 'multiplication' of open doors in the house at jolly corner gives Brydon a clear view into the compartments of his mind. However, he begins to panic when he senses the presence obstructing his vision.

This maze may also be noted in the formal structure in which time and space play a vital role. Our identity, as we know, cannot be established without a past even if we would like to deny it, and both protagonists have been acquainted with their actual obsession in the past. This image helps to create their present and future fates. Brydon has several images in the past; perhaps it is for this reason that he states so firmly, "I know what I *am*" before entering upon his search. In his encounter with his likeness the narrator introduces another time which complicates the issue: "Brydon was to know afterwards, was to recall and make out, the

particular thing he had believed during the rest of his descent” (TJC, 349). This proleptic statement contrasts with the purpose of Brydon’s quest: to discover what he might have been had he stayed in New York. The subsequent narration in “William Wilson” both intensifies the significance of the central theme and heightens the ambiguity of the final encounter between the two Wilsons.

Poe does not allow his protagonist very much space. Wilson’s school, “a palace of enchantment” and perhaps far removed from reality, also very clearly defines his mental capacity and the scene of his experience. Poe shows that physical flight is futile since Wilson has become entrapped by his unrepentant soul. The school gate “was riveted and studded with iron bolts and surmounted with jagged iron spikes” (WW, 160). The children went through it three times a week: twice to confessions and once to enjoy a brief flight into fancy in the neighbouring fields. Wilson elopes and faces an inevitable doom: his references to valleys and tunnels only help to stress this. Brydon enjoys more liberty. At times he is restricted to the confines of a room, especially during his intense moments with Alice Staverton, and his walk through the city shows how limited he feels upon returning to New York. However, within the house at jolly corner, the scene of his experience, both the reader and Brydon experience a feeling of immense space;¹⁴ there are several floors, many doors, windows and skylights and the protagonist hunts his game or tracks down his enemy to the rear of the house which he considers his jungle. The restlessness of the protagonist’s eyes most effectively discovers the final image; even here he can perceive distance and the possibility of an alternative. Wilson, however, has become imprisoned for ever, as at school. Only Brydon is given the opportunity to overcome his materialistic self.

Is it possible to solve this gigantic paradox which creates such a startling impact upon the reader? Do we now know and understand the protagonists and their doubles? An ambiguity runs through each tale which, although in keeping with the complexity of the theme, affords no easy answer to these questions. Poe’s setting is somewhat unreal as he clouds the moments of encounter in a fantastic atmosphere—reflected in “The Jolly Corner” in Alice’s dreams, Brydon’s mystification of the house and his evocation of this other self—and yet, as the tale progresses, Wilson’s torment and anguish caused by his supernatural supervisor grows more and more convincing. We may compare “William Wilson” with *The Double* by Dostoevsky in this respect. At first Golyadkin fully engages the reader’s compassion, but, curiously, by the end he willingly abandons the poor man to meet his fate at the hand of his persecutor. The narrators in these two texts carefully avoid precision in their narration of events and a close examination would reveal a wealth of

¹⁴ This is interesting since James’s struggle with his reader is a central theme in his fiction. He is so aware of the ‘arc’ which separates both the reader and himself as they view the situation, and his aim is to diminish the ‘arc’ so that the end of the story is reached when the reader’s position coincides with his own; in my opinion, disputable in this case.

inconsistencies. However, let us just ask ourselves one question of each tale to point out its ambiguity.

Firstly, in "William Wilson", the apparent encounter between the two Wilsons at the end makes us wonder whether Wilson's double exists as a separate entity—like Golyadkin Jr—or as a figment of the imagination. Within the boundaries of the academy where Wilson witnessed the paradox of his pastor/principal we can be sure a second William Wilson did in fact exist. Although Wilson had the consolation that only he noticed his namesake's cruel imitations, there was a "notion" among the upper classes that they were brothers. "Nothing could more seriously disturb me, ... than any allusion to a similarity of mind, person or condition existing between us", Wilson informs us. This secret relationship, which so vexed him at school, forms part of his obsession, especially since his namesake so annoyingly advised him (WW, 164). The stranger remains anonymous throughout the tale: someone appears at Eton according to the servant, and the evidence of the dropped cloak—noted only by Wilson as a second identical cloak—may be offered as proof that he appeared at Oxford. Whether the candles really went out or whether his peers heard II's warning is left to the reader's interpretation since Glendinning, the object of his fraud, had already become "an object for the pity of all [to be protected] from the ill offices even of a fiend" (WW, 173). At the end, when they meet face to face, their isolation from the outside world is clearly noted since Wilson bolts the door when someone tries to enter. As II advances towards Wilson, the protagonist realises that the image he sees before him is his antagonist. Wilson: "not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, mine own!" His adversary, no longer speaking in a whisper, claims: "In me didst thou exist — and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself" (WW, 178). Wilson has apparently been condemned and destroyed by his own image; that is, by himself.

Secondly, in "The Jolly Corner", Brydon's evocation of his second self raises the question of which identity he finally assumes. Did he actually overcome his materialistic and mutilated self? Alice Staverton declares she could have liked each one, first correcting Brydon by stating that "you came to yourself" and finally complicating her own remark by murmuring: "And he isn't —no, he isn't— you!" (TJC, 357). Brydon strangely encountered a presence with greater passion than himself. It is surely interesting to note that he compares the beauty of his state upon regaining consciousness to that of a man who, going to sleep with the news of some great inheritance and dreaming it away, awakens "to serenity of certitude and has only to lie and watch it grow" (TJC, 352). This will be his situation if he converts the house at jolly corner into an apartment building; an idea he confirmed in his moment of crisis. He has been unhappy; the 'black stranger' has also been unhappy.

Perhaps the title of each tale may help us here. Poe's tale, firstly, may be interpreted as *Will I am Wilson*. Bearing in mind the paradox of the Principal/Pastor and the emphasis on Wilson's vexation at the stranger's interference with his will, we may conclude that Wilson and his double are one and the same person: good and evil. The condemned man is what is left after the destruction: the wilful child was

forced to pay for his wilfulness in the end. Therefore, II is a figment of the imagination; but who then was the stranger at Eton? Secondly, "The Jolly Corner" is the site upon which the revelation takes place. It embodies Brydon's past and present obsession since he might have lived there if he had stayed in New York. He has a choice. However, he cannot leave this house and he awakens to his new knowledge within its walls. Alice is his only hope of a link with the future as she tries to raise him out of his imprisonment by offering her love and hoping he will respond. I think he does respond and is therefore free to establish his identity. However, if he destroys the house at jolly corner and constructs an apartment building, will it make something out of him as "it has made dozens of others"? The doubt remains and the paradox is unsolved in each case. That, basically, is the frightening essence of human existence.

Both these tales present problems and give us food for thought. It is evident that the gigantic paradox is in fact too monstrous for solution at this stage. The tales span the nineteenth century and share many points in common, not mainly as the work of American writers, but as examples of the theme of the double at its best. Poe's treatment of the theme is more Romantic and Gothic but as he himself insisted: "If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany but of the soul..."¹⁵ Terror is central to this treatment by both authors of the most agonizing inner struggle and insatiable curiosity of their protagonists to reach an identity and attain a certain power within society. Both, however, remain outcasts, and the reader cannot evade the intimate nature of each protagonist's inner battle with the mysterious unknown. Both the formal and thematic development of each text reveals the haunting persistency of the double motif and provokes the reader to participate in this inner quest—as it has afflicted each protagonist so relentlessly—in order to reach an understanding of his own 'second self'. Superstition may have helped us to ward off, and even to ignore, the evil spirit in the past, but we should now learn to recognize the existence of such a self and to come to terms with it. The moral implications in each text offer little consolation. Such a recognition is dangerous, but it may help us to answer the question each protagonist must surely ask himself: what, in the end, have we made of our experience? In "William Wilson", the wickedness of man condemns him to the life of an outcast; his only consolation lies in the "softening influence" of death (WW, 158). However, the insistence upon knowledge, the conscious mind and freedom of choice in "The Jolly Corner" at least offers us the chance to reflect upon such a question and, possibly, even to justify our answer. This tiny ray of hope for man, which shines through the surrounding fog, is certainly an important element to take into consideration as we embark upon the age of the exploration of consciousness in twentieth-century literature; the age of self-discovery and tentative inner enlightenment.

¹⁵ Quoted in the "Introduction" written by David Galloway to *Selected Writings* by Edgar Allan Poe, p. 23.

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