# Textual and Sexual Revisions: The Dynamics of Queer Identification(s) in Henry James' *The Middle Years*

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**Abstract:**
As one way of approaching the heterogeneity of potential textual meanings, the present discussion on one of James' earlier short stories, "The Middle Years," serves the objective of reading a self-questioning and ultimately queer identity formation process into the protagonist's pursuit of meaning. More precisely, it will be set forth how the story's central motifs, the reading and the revisioning routine, can be considered as allegorizing a quest for signification of which an unambiguous meaning can never be ascertained. Moreover, within this process of identity formation the developed pursuit of signification will be deliberated as marking an internal negotiation process of the central and unfixed self's various failed and/or queer identity possibilities. Ultimately, the close considerations of the process of introspection will be substantiated as intensely unsettling, but also as opening up ways to generate a complex and dynamic concept of the self, which constantly strives to repudiate other possibilities and which struggles to set up boundaries against alternative selves. By means of defamiliarizing the self, a new, more diffuse and dissonant, in other words, queer self is given birth to.

1 In the 1898 preface to his most renowned ghost story "The Turn of the Screw", Henry James writes:

> There is not only from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values are positively all blanks save so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness – on which punctual effects of strong causes no writer can ever fail to plume himself – proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures. (128)

James goes on explicating that, by these said terms, the author of the text himself is not only "released from weak specifications" about any monstrous and possibly outrageous details, but the "utmost conceivability" is fashioned by the "appreciation, speculation, and imagination" of the reader (ibid.). By aspiring to leave or purposely create absence at the very center of the text, James, in his theorizing of signification, evacuates the idea of essence against the realist assumption that there always is an essential core. As the absence of value is distinguished as the true resource and the blank is considered precious, only "fantastic figures" remain, whose specification is left to the reader's own interpretative authority in order to create the best possible effect. Following this argument, signification in James' writing is to be largely appreciated as a production rather than as a product, ultimately leaving the pursuit of the core meaning and the excitement generated by this knowledge-seeking experience at the heart of James' theory of representation that fundamentally evades definiteness and, in doing so, inexorably propagates ambiguity.

2 In her wistful opening reflections in *Tendencies* on the high rates of suicides among queer youth, Eve Sedgwick describes the intent attachment queer children cultivate to cultural objects and those queer adults maintain to cultural texts, "whose meaning seem[s] mysterious, excessive, or oblique," as the prime resource for queer survival (3). For Sedgwick, the "irreducible multilayeredness and multiphrasedness of what queer survival means" demands that the "seamless and univocal whole," in which sexual identity and all its multifarious characteristics are supposed to be organized, be called into question (ibid.). Within the strategy for queer survival, pursued in all segments of day-to-day life, unitary significations of sexual identity, aligning and molding together the numerous and most diverse dimensions of one's sexuality, need be disarticulated and disengaged. Sedgwick, therefore, outlines an approach of queer (mis)reading practices, i.e. reading queer. This is finally brought to a conclusion by her potent definition of queer: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (8).

3 Considering the two ruminations on evasive signification in relation to each other, one is soon tempted to posit Sedgwick's reading project as the perfect corollary of James' reflections about his writing. The coincidence is not all too surprising. Writing positively queer textual subjects in an era which aims at the constant generation and rigidification of clear-cut definitions and which, in particular, goes out of its way to read "homosexuals" in terms of "a radically potent, if negatively charged, relation to signifying practices" and which subjects them to "a cultural imperative that viewed them as inherently textual – as bodies that might well bear a 'hallmark' that could, and must, be read" (Edelman 6), can finally only be achieved by writing blanks and, consequently, by leaving "more or less fantastic figures" to the conceptualization of the reader.

4 Given the absence of definite signifiers what remains central within James' practices of representation is not so much the (missing) signifier itself but the *pursuit* of signification. Especially in many of James' tales in which he shows a self-ascribed "predilection for poor sensitive gentlemen" the main characters set off on pursuits of such a kind in which they seek to explore their own signification, their identification (Preface to "The Altar of the Dead" IX). What is clear in these narratives in the first instance, then, is that a multiplicity of meanings and textual levels leave open the possibilities of myriad readings and interpretations. The protagonists' projections of their own identity upon various screens can be seen to allegorize their distinct disputes with their alternative selves. This is why as one

way of approaching the heterogeneity of potential meanings, the present discussion on one of James' earlier short stories, "The Middle Years," shall serve the objective of reading a self-questioning and ultimately queer identity formation process into the pursuit of meaning. More precisely, it will be set forth how the story's central motifs, the reading and the revisioning routine, can be considered as allegorizing a quest for signification of which an unambiguous meaning can never be ascertained. In accordance with James' contention about leaving his "values" all blank, thereby creating excitement, "punctual effects" and prevailing "fantastic figures," it will be demonstrated that incongruity and ambiguity remain James' critical objectives in respect to identity construction. Moreover, within this process of identity formation the developed pursuit of signification will be deliberated as marking an internal negotiation process of the central and unfixed self's various identity possibilities that fail to consolidate themselves within a conventional fixed frame of notions of identity, and that, consequently, might duely be termed queer. Ultimately, quite analogous to Sedgwick's positing queer as both an "identity-constituting" and an "identity-fracturing discourse," the close considerations of the process of introspection will be substantiated as intensely unsettling, but also as opening up ways to generate a complex and dynamic concept of the self, which constantly strives to repudiate other possibilities and which struggles to set up boundaries against alternative selves (*Tendencies* 9). Indeed, for this latter process of queer self-constitution, identity-fracturing, which Sally Munt characterizes more succinctly in her understanding of queer as "a project of defamiliarization, a sexed-up version of the Russian Formalist's conception of ostranenie," will prove to be a precondition (23). By means of defamiliarizing the self, a new, more diffuse and dissonant, in other words, queer self is given birth to.

5 "The Middle Years" stands out as a particularly pertinent starting point for the present discussion of queered Jamesian identity formation due to its thematic footing, which involves the scrutinization of a self-examination endeavor surfacing as a demanding and strenuous process of revisioning. "The Middle Years" leaves the exact makeup of the self as a text blank and rather shows by what means and in which way the negotiation of identity is engendered and advanced through a homosocial and homoerotic bond between two men, a writer and his admirer. As will be demonstrated, the screen and the reference point for this examination and negotiation of self is to be discerned within Dencombe's own fictional writing because it is within the protagonist's literature that he comes to negotiate his identity by means of studying and re-evaluating his own fiction through the lenses of an accomplice, another man who is deeply fascinated and obsessed with the writings. The self-negotiation,

then, works through a set-up of a purely homosocial triangular structure involving the writer's own as well as the reader's passion for Dencombe's pieces of fiction, which will further be considered as a trope for the author's creative self. As a result, the infatuation with the younger creative self can be read as having homo- and autoerotic underpinnings, a fixation, which will not only be established as the driving force behind the process of self-examination, but which will further have warrant to regard the textual revisioning in terms of sexual revisioning.

6 "The Middle Years" opens with a close description of the mediocrity and mundanity of the setting and, supported by James dense prose, already allows for constitutive inferences concerning its protagonist. Bournemouth, a seaside and health resort, shows "pretensions of the south", yet only "so far as you could have it in the north" ("The Middle Years" 211). Although the resort seems to have disappointed him initially, within the present picture of languor, the slowly convalescing writer Dencombe, who is immediately exhausted when climbing the stairs in the garden, "was reconciled to the prosaic" of the scene (ibid.). At a first glance, these tranquil contemplations indicate that for Dencombe contentment has been achieved by his mere growing accustomed to his present circumstances. However, despite his happiness at his currently "reasserted strength," he suddenly hesitates in his thoughts realizing that "he was better, of course, but better, after all, than what?" (ibid.). His abrupt recognition of his mere relative recuperation at once goes beyond the physical, marking a similar regret for the loss of his potency as a writer: "He should never again, as at one or two great moments of the past, be better than himself" (ibid.). In order for the said proposition to have any sensible communicative substance, one has to assume that Dencombe compares his present self ("he") to his past existence, the younger, creative writerly self, which is expressed through the reflexive pronoun "himself." At this point the distinction and indeed the confusion of pronoun reference already indicate the split between the current self and the personal reflection. In a swift flow of consciousness prompted by his first self-query, his frame of mind rapidly dwindles as he further becomes aware of or rather retrieves the recognition of his lost potentials: "The infinite of life had gone, and what was left of the dose was a small glass engraved like a thermometer by the apothecary" (ibid.). More accurately, what he seems to have lost is his capacity to grasp the profundity of the "spirit of man," whence his present and real self can do nothing but sit and stare "at the sea, which appeared all surface and twinkle, far shallower than the spirit of man" (ibid.). Above all, he regrets to no longer possess the potent capacity to access "the abyss of human illusion that was the real, the tideless deep" (ibid.). The ostensibly oxymoronic combination of human illusion as

reality does not only underscore the impressive insightfulness of the artist, but it serves to demonstrate that it is the writer's unique talent to penetrate the abyss of "human illusion" – by way of creative imagination – in order to recuperate the reality of the "spirit of man" (ibid.). Lamenting his lost creativity, Dencombe seems to plunge into his own abyss. At the end of the opening paragraph, the atmosphere has moved from the unassuming description of the mediocre setting at the outset to a strangely gloomy mood of world-weariness and melancholy, finally paving the way for the reader to gain access to and to descend into the protagonist's abyss, his downright depressive condition that further consolidates itself thereafter.

7 Despite his affliction concerning his own lost qualifications, "poor Dencombe sighed for" having "a second age, an extension," for "[a]h for another go! – ah for a better chance!" ("The Middle Years" 214). Then again, he deeply feels "the pang that had been sharpest during the last few years – the sense of ebbing time, of shrinking opportunity; and now he felt not so much that his last chance was going as that it was gone indeed" (213). Dencombe's expressed grief over his art finally culminates in his first look at his newly published novel, *The Middle Years*, and his inability to recollect anything of its content: "he had become conscious of a strange alienation. He had forgotten what his book was about" (212-3). The "strange alienation" from his own work is certainly remarkable, as it posits an estrangement of the personal and the literary self, i.e. the authorial self. This division of selves is further disclosed, moreover, when Dencombe, exhausted and burned-out, goes on grieving over all the sacrifices he has made for his art – "He had done all he should ever do, and yet hadn't done what he wanted" (213). Within this statement, then, Dencombe discriminates between a literary career or existence and a private reality, whereas the former has clearly developed at the expense of the author's personal life, an actuality about which Dencombe seems to have rather agonizing feelings. Still, although he regrets having "struggled and suffered for it [the literary career], making sacrifices not to be counted," even at this rather cheerless state of his life he contemplates that "[t]here was an infinite charm for [him] in feeling as he had never felt before that diligence *vincit omnia*" (214). These last words are, of course, a paraphrase of Virgil's proverbial "amor vincit omnia," potentially indicating Dencombe's complacency about his life's work.

8 The proposition about the division of the selves is further enhanced by the protagonist's reading of his own work of fiction, which has just arrived as a pre-published volume. Despite the lack of details concerning the contents of the book, the analogy of the title of James' tale, which, after all, relates to the affairs of the middle-aged Dencombe, and

that of Dencombe's novel, clearly implies that *The Middle Years* is similarly concerned with autobiographical idiosyncracies of the protagonist. The two works of fiction seem to be polysemous only to the degree that "The Middle Years" first and foremost examines the mature writer's reflection on his younger, literary creative self. The literary expression of his younger self he finds in his autobiographical novel. These compositional features, then, leave Dencombe with a split sense of self; one involving his present existence and one his literary self finding its expression in a semi-fictional text, his autobiography. The predicament of his complete detachment from his creative self falls into place when he begins to read his own novel which leaves him astonished at the fact that "it was extraordinarily good" (213). By means of reading his own literature, he "*lived* once more into his story" and "was drawn down" by the force of his literary self as it were, "as by a siren's hand, to where, *in the dim underworld of fiction*, the great glazed tank of art, strange silent subjects float" (ibid.; own emphasis). This dense passage on Dencombe's extraordinary self-reading experience allows for several paramount radings. Firstly, it demonstrates the power of the detached literary reflection of the self to entice the personal, the reader self, into its own separate world. Secondly, notwithstanding Dencombe's sacrifices in the actual world, he seems to have one source of reparation as he is able to actually "live" in the fictional (under-) world, down "the abyss of human illusion," with all the vast possibilities and "strange subjects" that the creation of art allows (ibid.). The exact pattern of how the relation to the literary other by way of reading is established will have to be further explored, noting for now that at the moment of Dencombe's diving into the underworld, he has already made eye contact with a man who is completely absorbed with a book bound in an "alluringly red" cover (212).

9 As the plot further unfolds, distortions owing to the mode of focalization leave the reader to assume that Dencombe's certainly cannot be considered an objective version of the proceedings. This leaves Perry Westbrook to contend that Dencombe, in his character and his struggle, merely be viewed as an instance of pure irony (137). However, it might sooner be useful to consider the tale in terms of "dream and myth, fiction on the brink of dissolving into abstraction" as Joyce Carol Oates suggests (259). Regardless of these limitations on reliability, some of the protagonist's central qualities are clearly discernable already at the outset of the story where Dencombe proves to be intensely self-absorbed, even nearing solipsism through a mindset that regards other characters as only "perform[ing]" for his "recreation" (212). Moreover, he appears to be suffering from his constant solitude and, finally, he shows a distinctive melancholic (dis)connection to his literature / his literary self, whose loss he grieves and who has the force to lure and absorb him still (ibid.). Undoubtedly,

to the extent that Dencombe experiences a deep anxiety about his improbable "extension" and "second chance" in order to "better himself", and to the extent that his coming to terms with his own literary self appears to be beyond his control, the reader, through the present mode of focalization, is indeed led to feel sympathetic with "poor Dencombe" ("The Middle Years" 211; 214; 225).

10 Dencombe's strained connection to his literary reflection, his past, younger and ultimately fictionalized self, takes a sudden turn as soon as he meets the young physician Dr. Hugh. As has already been alluded to, Dencombe, initially, is unable to make out his own text. Only when he sees Dr. Hugh and when Hugh reads passages from the novel to him is Dencombe able to reconnect to his seemingly lost self and, consequently, to rehabilitate his creative self. On a more material level, Hugh draws Dencombe out of the depression by means of making him appreciate his self / himself once again. Dencombe is psychologically restored through a more comfortable and more immediate relation of his selves, facilitated through another man's reading of his own work as well as the other man's admiration, his "infatuation" with Dencombe's literature and his literary creative self ("The Middle Years" 217). Regarding this triangular structure of desire, Leland Person's queer reading of the short story can be essentially subscribed to when he contends that "Dencombe's creative rejuvenation depends in large part, then, upon the mirroring effect of another man's admiration. Hugh serves not only as Dencombe's double but also as the subject of a homo-aesthetic desire that renders Dencombe a desirable object" (140).

11 At their first meeting, Dencombe is amazed and seemingly bewildered when he realizes that Dr. Hugh, while neglecting the company of the women during their stroll on the beach, is completely absorbed with reading Dencombe's novel. When they eventually meet face to face, Dr. Hugh clarifies straight away that he is not the reviewer for whom Dencombe has originally mistaken him, but Dencombe refrains from giving away his own identity as the author of the text. As a consequence, they both inhabit the similar, or the shared position of the passive reader sitting on the bench by the shore and enjoying the pleasures of reading literature. The ostensibly identical status as readers of a mutually appreciated text allows for the ensuing dialogue in which Dr. Hugh, "the greatest admirer in the new generation," who is "enamoured with literary form," opens his heart about his "infatuation" with Dencombe's oeuvre, in particular with his last novel, which "is the best thing he has done yet," as well as with the novelist as a "man" ("The Middle Years" 216, 217). While reading to Dencombe,

[Dr. Hugh] grew vivid, in the balmy air, to his companion, for whose deep refreshment he seemed to have been sent; and was particularly ingenuous in describing how recently he had

become acquainted, and how instantly infatuated, with the only man who had put flesh between the ribs of an art that was starving on superstitions. (“The Middle Years” 217)

The metaphor of art, and specifically of Dencombe’s autobiographical *The Middle Years*, recognized as a physical body elicits several implications. First of all, it once again equates the piece of literature with the author figure. On yet another level, it makes the fiction and, crucially, the reader’s relation to it “gr[o]w vivid” (ibid.). The body of Dencombe’s writing becomes the object of a fixation, betraying the homoerotic relation to this object on Dr. Hugh’s part.

12 Dencombe, on the other hand, cannot be deemed above suspicion seeing that Hugh’s frank confession has been set in motion by Dencombe’s own scheme of hiding his identity. Seemingly unperturbed, he takes in Hugh’s cordial corroboration of his admiration, acknowledging that “his visitor’s attitude promised him a luxury of intercourse” (218). In fact, in due course of their conversation, it becomes obvious how Dencombe perfectly controls the situation avowing that “[t]his young friend, for a representative of the new psychology, was himself easily hypnotised, and if he became abnormally communicative it was only a sign of his real subjection” (ibid.). Subsequently, Dencombe plainly takes advantage of Hugh’s amenability to influence him seeing that Hugh follows his instructions, although Dencombe is not yet known as the adored writer. How exactly Dencombe can make use of Hugh is notably explicable within the outlined economy of desire: Through Hugh’s “infatuation” with Dencombe’s creative literary self, Dencombe is able to desire his own body of work again, a corpus from which he had been alienated just until Hugh’s arrival (ibid.). Given the division of selves, one might recognize Dencombe’s as either homo- or autoerotic desire, induced and redirected through Hugh. It is this desire which appears to be vital for the convalescence of the writer when it becomes manifest as a compensation for his previously unobtainable “second chance”, “his extension,” as it empowers him to integrate his personal with his creative self, and, moreover, to come to terms with the worth of his work of art as it stands (211; 214).

13 What seems to be singular and crucial to the all-male exchange of desire is its one-dimensional direction to a desired object that is “merely” fiction, an aesthetic piece of art. Hence, the cover of the object of desire is rather extraordinarily described as “alluringly red” and further as “duly meretricious” (212). It seems to be equally important, moreover, that the core of the book, its content, remains void, so that Hugh’s infatuation is primarily owed to the literary style of the prose. Nevertheless, reading and discussing *The Middle Years* with his friend, leave Dencombe “lost, he was lost, he was lost if he couldn’t be saved” and with “a

deep demonstration of desire" (220). Regarding these characteristics of the object of desire, its aesthetics and style over content, the homo- and autoeroticism outlined so far ought to be more accurately defined in terms of the shared aesthetic fascination with art, all of which seems to be captured pointedly by Person's expression of "homo-aestheticism" (140 ff). Along these lines, homo-aestheticism might furthermore be apt to describe the nonce-core of Dencombe's fiction, a space that is located by the writer only now: "Only to-day, at last, had he begun to see, so that what he had hitherto done was a movement without a direction" (221). Through Hugh he has learned "to find the point of view, to pick up the pearl," which, in Dencombe's own words, signifies the "unwritten" (226).

14 In view of this hermeneutics it still needs to be discussed to what degree Dencombe's scheme of redirected and enforced self-absorption in his affiliation with Dr. Hugh works to rehabilitate him psychologically. Undoubtedly, through his own writing adored by and read to him by another man, he has moved from a deep feeling of alienation to a restoration of his own self. This recovering occurs all of a sudden in a virtual epiphany: "Everything came back to him, but came back with a wonder, came back, above all, with a high and magnificent beauty" (213). He has clearly sought redemption through Dr. Hugh, an appeal which is underscored by the mystically religious language permeating the text. Hugh as the "servant of the altar" with "the old reverence in faith," is similarly labeled as "an apparition […] above the law" that allowed Dencombe to be "charmed […] into forgetting that he looked for a magic that was not of this world" (222). With Hugh retaining all these competences, "[w]ho would work the miracle for him but the young man who could combine such lucidity with such passion?" (ibid.). Through the more than sympathetic reading of Dencombe's *The Middle Years*, his fictional and literary self, Dr. Hugh seems to embody Dencombe's chance for salvation, a miracle that essentially comprises Dencombe's recognition that "[h]is career was over, no doubt, but it was over, after all with *that*" (213). The highlighted "that" on the surface refers to Dencombe's reading of his newly published work and, more immediately, to "an emotion peculiar and intense," made possible through a homo-aesthetic reading practice implemented by the strong faith of the altar's servant (ibid.).

15 Notwithstanding the reparative faculty owing to the erotic force of the sketched reader-relationship pattern, complete reconciliation seems to be thwarted by several arising complications. Naturally, the palpable predicament is given through the doctor's "rid[ing] two horses at once," his concentration on the writer when, in fact, the expected and financially rewarded attention ought to be directed to the countess, "who paid so much for his fidelity that she must have it all: she refused him the right to other sympathies" (223).

Dencombe is deeply upset by Miss Vernham, the only non-queer character in the anecdote and hence an emblem of fierce heteronormativity, who rigidly demands that he "leave Doctor Hugh alone" (ibid.). When she further informs him about the inheritance apparently intended to be bequeathed on the doctor, Dencombe weakly acquiesces to abandon Hugh for good, which, he is sure, would denote "the probable sacrifice of his 'extension'" (224; 225). However, Dr. Hugh's devotion is set not on the factual life and his future, but on Dencombe's fiction and his past: Still in high spirits, he declares "I gave her up for you," "I chose to accept, whatever they might be, the consequences of my infatuation […]. A fortune be hanged! It's your own fault if I can't get your things out of my head" (227). From worldly (and female) troubles and contracts the pair seems to be utterly secluded so that this first obstacle to Dencombe's reconciliation can easily be overcome.

16 Nonetheless, within the male-male taxonomy of desire a first complication arises through Dencombe's textual revising of his novel, a practice which can be seen to correspond to the modification of and negotiation with the desired object, the creative literary self. Deeply engrossed in putting forward exceptionally beautiful expressions from *The Middle Years*, Dr. Hugh mistakably consults Dencombe's own volume and is completely taken aback when finding that it has been significantly amended. Hugh "looked grave an instant" and "suddenly change[d] colour," and Dencombe, who, apparently having been caught in the act, directly mirrors the marker of shame – "for an instant [it] made him change colour" – when Hugh reproachfully remarks "I see you've been altering the text!" (219). Dencombe "stammered, at any rate ambiguously, […] before, stretching out a hand to his visitor with a plaintive cry, he lost his senses altogether" (ibid.). The forceful suspension that transpires and ascends to a climax, leaving the younger stunned and speechless, and the elder losing his consciousness altogether, certainly corroborates the significance of the revelation at hand. The secret discovered, is, of course, the authorial secret, Dencombe's identity. In fact, having recuperated from the first shock, Hugh's countenance expresses "more than a suspicion of his [Dencombe's] identity" (ibid.). Dencombe, in turn, after having regained consciousness, realizes that "[t]hat identity was ineffaceable now" and, what's more, that he was "disappointed, disgusted" about it, reproaching himself ostensibly in a reference to his physical health that "[h]e oughtn't to have exposed himself to strangers" (ibid.). Finally, Dr. Hugh, sitting by his bedside when Dencombe wakes again, remarks frankly: "I know all about you now" (ibid.).

17 The protracted postponement for divulging his identity and the final culmination through its revelation, in the first instance, provide evidence for Dencombe's strained relation

to his seemingly alienated and lost younger creative self. By way of disavowal, Dencombe's personality clearly seems to portray a lacking sense of completion. After all, through Dr. Hugh, Dencombe has just been able to reestablish a (homo- and auto-aesthetic) relation to his younger self, apparently only by means of feigning and sustaining the façade of a shared reader position. Moreover, deferring the self-acknowledgement of his real authorial identity has sustained the deployment and exchange of homo- and auto-aestetic desire whose dynamic seems to have increased precisely through the suspension of both exposure and of closure. Person's analysis complements this reading as it explains that Dencombe's fainting at another man's gaze at his "fingering" his own style, an undertaking that Person somewhat daringly specifies as "an act of writerly masturbation," is explicable through the violation of privacy on the one hand, and the power shift that being "outed" entails on the other (141). As a consequence of the now outed "ineffaceable" identity, Dencombe, having tasted "a patch of heaven," slides back into his abyss of despair: "He felt as if he had fallen into a hole too deep to descry any little patch of heaven" ("The Middle Years" 219). Then again, as the events unfold, we learn about "gallant Dr. Hugh's" leniency and that his compassion towards Dencombe's writerly self remains unmitigated: "I prefer your flowers, then, to other people's fruit, and your mistakes to other people's successes" (221). Hence, despite the rupture through the revelation of Dencombe's authorial identity, which has changed their relation forever, the circulation of desire has not come to a halt. Quite to the contrary, only now Dencombe appeals to Dr. Hugh for an "extension," an extension of their romance which serves to nurture Dencombe's relation and reconnection to his younger self.

18 The persistence of the interchange of erotic energy, then, is mainly explicable through the fact that the object of desire, the text of the anthropomorphized *The Middle Years*, defers closure exactly through Dencombe's unrelenting rereading and revision of the text. By the same token, re-vision can be construed as an important channel for connecting Dencombe's personal self with his creative literary/fictional self, and it does so by maintaining a dynamic of volatility and changeability to the text, and thus to the eroticized younger self. As to revision as such, Julie Rivkin in her essay "Doctoring the Text" finds that "The Middle Years" "characterizes revision as the hallmark of literary authority," seeing that it is not merely treated as a project undertaken at some point during a writer's career but instead is seen as "intrinsic to the activity of writing itself" (152). Along these lines, Dencombe's revision can be regarded as strengthening his powerful authorial position and his right to the altering of his text. Rivkin further adds, however, that the tale "also treats revision as a source of authorial vulnerability" (ibid.). The author's susceptibility resulting from the public

exposure of the very private practice of revision to the reader, Hugh/You, has already been spelled out. After all, the exposure amounts to the author's own confession of the imperfection of his, and, to be more precise, of his younger self's genius. However, if regarded from a different angle, this seemingly shameful confession of artistic deficiency is easily excusable.

19 All the same, the revisiting of the text seems to be a very sensitive matter on a personal level as well, seeing that the writer submits his own 'body' of work to a rather dangerous surgery, as it were, in which the whole organism can potentially be upset through incising the body at one spot. Besides the complexity of the process, the merit of this operation appears to be significant, at least for James, who acknowledges himself that revision – just like for the newly rejuvenated Dencombe – constituted a "living affair," the key figure for James' reading and revisionary practice: "I couldn't at all […] forecast these chances and changes and proportions; they could but show for what they were as I went" (qtd. in Murphy 177). Living revision further served to secure James' legacy, although one has to admit that, ironically, he desperately failed this latter intention in the long run as his pre-revised texts have been preserved and as they oftentimes gain far higher regard among contemporary James scholars than his later edits (163-4).

20 Considering once more the scene of identity exposure through revision between Dencombe and Hugh in conjunction with the concomitant manifestations of inner turmoil and outward expressions of deep shame on both sides, the "passionate corrector's" revisionary practice can truly be considered as providing a supplementary impetus to the economy of desire in general and to Dencombe's negotiation with his alienated and recovered creative self in particular ("The Middle Years" 219). As has already been suggested, revision as the shameful confession of the creative self's imperfection does certainly not estrange the present re-reader from his alternative self, but his weak spots only seem to render the younger literary self all the more alluring. Given their paralleled fixation on the identical object figure, Dencombe's sentiments reverberate in Hugh's expression: "It's for your mistakes I admire you" (221). The seemingly paradoxical enforcement of the dynamics of erotic desire through the unintended exposure can be properly elucidated through Eve Sedgwick's eminent work on the significance of James' retrospectiveness, "Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity." In it Sedgwick examines the complex shame-stricken connection between the middle-aged author, James, and his younger literary self by consulting James' later written prefaces. James' revisionary practice, the argument goes, is as much an intersubjective as it is an intergenerational, and, by extension, a homoerotic one (cf. 40). In a

line of reasoning complementing the present reading, Sedgwick contends that for James "the younger author is present in these prefaces as a figure in himself, but even more frequently the fictions themselves, or characters in them, are given his form" (ibid.). What results is a "sanctioned intergenerational flirtation" that is situated and originated within what she terms "the narcissistic circuit of shame" (ibid.) The affect of shame, Sedgwick argues, is the prime constituent of the relation between the two Jamesian selves because "the persistence with which shame accompanies their [the embarrassments of the past] repeated conjuration is matched by the persistence with which, in turn, he describes himself as cathecting or eroticizing that very shame as a way of coming into loving relation to queer or 'compromising' youth" (41). In James' prefaces, then, she distinguishes two interlinked circuits of shame, one referring to James' relation to his readers, the other to the narcissistic relation of the speaker and his own past self (39). Although this is not to equate James with his fictional creation, evidently, both of these intersubjective relations prove adequate to describe Dencombe's relation, firstly, to the reader via the outward expression of shame and, secondly, to his creative younger self, whose compromising work he revises. However, the latter analogy is somewhat oblique as for Dencombe the affect of shame seems to be not so much instituted through the younger writer's "impudence", which constitutes the major source of attraction for the elder James, but, Dencombe, conversely, appears to be primarily ashamed in the face of his present weakened artistic potency. This type of manifestation of shame, however, does not only serve to leave the interactional dynamics intact, but even fuels it the more by way of an unrelenting reciprocal dynamic which works through an exchange of tacit reproach and attraction.

21 In her theorizing on shame Sedgwick finally stresses its importance for the establishment and negotiation of identity. Building on Silvan Tomkins' contributions on affect theory, she finds that it is shame which "is now often considered the affect that most defines the space where a sense of self will develop" (37). Shame exerts its greatest influence during experiences where the present self is subjected to intense distress within both mentioned circuits of shame. Dencombe's revelation of authorial identity appears to portray this exact incidence, where "[s]hame floods into being as a moment, *a disruptive moment*, in a circuit of *identity-constituting identificatory communication*" (36 emphasis added). It is precisely the interruption of identity that, through affectual communication engenders a new and enforced identification. The contagiousness and the interaction of shame has already been located within Dencombe's and Hugh's mutual reflections of "blazons of shame," a type of affect communication which has been confirmed to result in a boundless proliferation,

indeed in an escalating spiral of distress, finally culminating in Dencombe's fainting. These shame interactions, then, mark typically Jamesian threshold experiences, and, consequently, support Sedgwick's case considering "shame as the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality" (38). Shame is thus positioned at the interface between Dencombe's introspection, his relation to the creative self, and the outward expression of shame through the revelation of this connection to another man, who in turn mirrors the shame reflection. Within this procedure, the latter expression constitutes an externalization which Sedgwick conceptualizes as the setting of performativity or performative theatricality. The outlined triangular interchange of the affect, ultimately, sees Dencombe's shame toward the reader intensify his own shame-laden affection to his creative self. Moreover, as much as the distinction and, indeed, the distance to the own creative self is eroticized, the tenderly loving relation – that Sedgwick detects between James and his younger self, too – merges Dencombe's two selves into one configuration of selves, which, however, through the constant revisionary practice, remains in a permanent circulation. In this way, shame as it finds its expression in "The Middle Years" as a representation of identificatory communication ultimately possesses a disruptively driven integrating force: Through the disruptive force of shame, a new form of intimacy is communicated.

22 If Dencombe's revisionary practice can be regarded as an identity establishing communication that works within the circuits of shame, it has to be established what the implications of such a queer affect are in the face of the queer subject. Positioning the younger literary, fictional and sexualized self within his pieces of writing, Dencombe's re-vision ought to be posited as a demonstration of the constant re-gazing and recognition and, first and foremost, as an expression of the changeability and malleability of the sexual self. To begin with, it is the "passionate corrector's" constant revision that will forever defer textual and sexual closure: "the last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself" (219). Garry Hagberg identifies this incapacity as the central point of concern to the story, making a case that Dencombe cannot acknowledge what he has done as an expression of his own self and, consequently, cannot achieve self-integration (227-30). Dencombe's alterations, in his view, are an emblem of the refusal, or incapacity to see the self in his own work (ibid.). Hagberg goes on perusing the tale`s moral meaning about the dangers of leaving parts of ourselves, and in particular our imaginations, aspirations and ideals, in a "hermetically sealed compartment of consciousness" (230). The ideal, then, is to synthesize the divided, compositional parts of ourselves, which Dencombe eventually achieves through

Dr. Hugh, who, through his appreciation of both selves, helps Dencombe realize that he, in fact, is his work, "that his real life is manifest in that body of work" (ibid.). Dencombe's newfound understanding results in an integration of self, so that the "last-minute triumph over self-alienation eradicates the existential crisis" (ibid.). Notwithstanding all the outlined processes, means and individual characters augmenting Dencombe's self-conceptualization through reconnecting him to his previously alienated creative self, it appears to be rather unpromising to assume that the new subjectivity creates "a whole identity where before there was only a fragmented, composite self" (ibid.). Quite to the contrary, there is no end put to the persistent revisionary practice of the self, which has further been elaborated as holding significant reparative capacities. All things considered, the continuing Sedwickian "identificatory communication" seems to be much more desirable than a resolved and static identification because only constant personal revision does justice to Dencombe's unstable, erratic and malleable sexual self.

23 Reading the textuality of Dencombe's fiction in terms of sexuality, a link substantiated through the characterized homo-aesthetic circulation of desire, it is particularly striking that, just like the text, sexual identification, too, is considered in the light of an absent or untraceable tangible core. In his preface to "The Middle Years," James writes that the end of his efforts in determining the "little situation here" was "to follow it as much as possible from its outer edge in, rather than from its centre outward" (414). This, James' "fond formula," is obscured by the master brewer's efforts to "set as many traps in the garden as its opposite may set in the wood; so that after boilings and reboilings of the contents of [his] small cauldron", he is convinced of having produced one of "the most expensive of its sort" (ibid.). Considering the bewitched contents of the text and the means with which the writer concocts meaning in the first instance, the seizure of a core is a truly intricate or altogether impossible task. Rather than extricating the core meaning, what remains is that "one can follow from the outer edge in," one can undertake the demanding journey whose end, however, one is not likely to reach, but during which one is liable (and meant) to get lost (ibid.). Hence, the textual reading and modes of interpretation, practiced by the two male characters of the story as much as by the extradiegetic readers themselves, can easily be seen in analogy to the pursuit of a substance of sexual identity, whose center appears to be as untraceable, yet still craves to be followed constantly.

24 As an explanation of this intractability and untracability of meaning, Priscilla Walton suggests that attempts to know and to discern meaning are doomed to failure in James' short story because it puts the protagonist *and* his art in the space of the feminine, a space which,

according to Cixous, is one which cannot find representation at all (cf. 81). Therefore, Walton convincingly argues, the tale privileges feminine over masculine modes of textual production since it foregrounds the unkowability of art (ibid.). The masculine and realist mode of textual interpretation is first indicated by Hugh, who, initially, insists on the presence of a single meaning, of "picking up the pearl" ("The Middle Years" 226). Dencombe, however, is completely aware of the intangibility of meaning, which becomes manifest in the pervading imagery of the sea and Dencombe's awareness of the dark "underworld of fiction" (213). He, too, desires the pearl, yet for him "the pearl is the unalloyed, the rest, the lost" and, significantly, "[t]he pearl is the unwritten" (ibid.). Hence, on his search for the pearl, the reader will only discover the treasure in what remains unmentioned, i.e. in what is subject to (his own) imagination, a proposition which obviously creates a link back to the introductory paragraph, where the "abyss of human illusion," potentially manifested in fiction, is established to be the real. "The Middle Years" therefore stresses the indeterminability, the decenteredness, and, in Walton's words, the "absence" and "unwritability" of the realist text (84). The only enterprise the reader may undertake is "the search for the presence of something which will elucidate the absence of meaning" (ibid.). In brief, the story makes a forceful point about the general difficulty of reading textuality and sexuality as well as about the impossibility to determine and define it more specifically.

25 Finally, the constant exchange through practices of writing, re-writing and reading can be considered as a demonstration of the interrelational nature of textuality/sexuality. Evidently, the story lays bare the limits of authorial intention when concluding with Dencombe's winged words: "We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art" ("The Middle Years" 227). Hence, literature cannot be unreservedly designed through the writer's consciousness alone. The pearl will only be recovered through the joint imaginary endeavor of writer and reader, who connect via a composition which, in all its complexity and unpredictability of the effects owing to the mixing of the contents in the cauldron, surpasses the pure original intent of the writer's pen by far. This intersubjective dynamic creates a pool of unstable entities – e.g. words, thoughts, interpretations – that are beyond the control of the author-reader circuit, i.e. which are subject to pure "madness of art," yet, in their own enigmatic fashion, contribute to the economy of desire (ibid.). For all the established limitations of authorial intention and control, the reader (Hugh/You) and his strategic position within the circuit of desire, by implication, must not be underestimated. In the end, after the authorial reconsiderations have been incorporated in the publishable edition,

the final version of the piece of fiction will always be subject to the readers' interpretation. It is their personal reading and re-reading experience which establishes meaning for the individual reader, thus providing manifold versions of textual bodies which will never be subjected to general definition and, therefore, always defer closure. Just like the textual production necessitates a complex interchange between writer *and* reader, one who expresses and one who perceives the mystical concoction, the homo-aesthetic desire cannot be fixated, but is shown to be convoluted, indirect, dynamic and, ultimately, incalculable just like the "madness of art" (ibid.). The creation and expression of the desire, moreover, strictly depends on the subject positions of either of the involved seeing that Dencombe's writing is as individual a production as is Hugh's reading of it. As a consequence, the representation of subject positions here ascertains Richard Dellamora's claim, which he puts forward in his study on Victorian masculinity, that "there is no unitary 'gay subject' just as there are no unitary 'masculine' and 'feminine' subjects" (4). Seeing that Dellamora, however, comes to this conclusion "despite the fact that representations are often shaped so as to induce an impression to the contrary" (to the inconsistency of gay subject positions), James' character illustrations clearly flout contemporary 19th century conventions and prove great variation.

26 Ultimately, reference will have to be made to James' further distinct dealings with identity constitution, which always proves to be a highly contested terrain in his writing. What Dencombe finds in his writing, the protagonist of "The Altar of the Dead", for instance, finds in the altar and Brydon ("The Jolly Corner") in a deserted house: the projection of their other selves, which have here been more closely defined in terms of their queer alterity. In "The Middle Years", just like in "The Author of Beltraffio", surreal connections to the selves established within works of fiction are correlated to 'real' relationships of two men within the actual story world. Hence, in both cases the prime reference for self-examination is located within and generated through novelistic creations by venerated writers. In contrast to the "The Middle Years," where the text of the other self is left entirely blank, in "The Jolly Corner" the exact physiognomy of the abominated alter ego is described and the instability of the self as text gains even greater focus. Bearing analogy with "The Middle Years," where revision has been identified as a "Living Affair," which is forever subject to amendment, in "The Altar of the Dead" the candles of personal relations are constantly tended to (qtd. in Murphy 177).

27 What all of these tales have in common, though to different degrees, is their charting of a protagonist that strives to establish a coherent self, a stable autobiography, or a self unchallenged by alternative possibilities. However, all of them are shown to ultimately fail in

their efforts. Although Stransom indubitably aspires to institute some synthesis of meaning in his text, he later has to admit that his altar yields "multiplied meanings" ("The Altar" 39). To some degree these correlations of these Jamesian queer selves, who "aren't made to signify monolithically" and in whose constitution "gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" loom large (*Tendencies* 8), and contemporary Queer Theory, explain James' representational popularity within postmodern culture and his sheer celebrity status within Queer Studies. Crucially, the discussion in this paper has sought to elucidate that, although classifications are beyond James' representational doctrine, seeking self-definition is crucial for an understanding of self, for individuation. If to be labelled at all, James' characters certainly can be assigned "queer", especially if, as Sedgwick has put forward so evocatively, "'queer' can signify only when attached to the first person" (*Tendencies* 9). Definitely, this holds true for James' self-defining queer selves more than for any other: what might be called a queer self-identification has been shown to be floating in a state of suspense within the elusive text, "the dim underworld of fiction" ("The Middle Years" 213).

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