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“What would it have made of me?”: Gender and National Identities in “The Jolly Corner”

This émigré may write graceful and pretty verses, essays, novels; but he will never do work to compete with his brother, who is strong enough to stand on his own feet, and do his work as an American.

Theodore Roosevelt, “True Americanism,” 1894

The increasing critical and theoretical attention to the interconnections between sexuality, nationality, and migration, especially with reference to the definition of queer identities, aims at bridging a gap in the ongoing theorization of these categories. Indeed, while nation and gender have been constantly invoked as mutually relevant notions and as necessary concepts in the discussion on migration, sexuality “tends to be deemed unimportant or equated with gender”1 and has thus been much less theorized in its relation to borders, nation, nationalism, and citizenship. The inclusion of sexuality and the focus on queerness as a destabilizing practice in relation to nationality, which the current scholarship develops mainly with regard to globalizing and migration processes, can be fruitfully extended to our gender-inflected reading of canonical writers of the past who have variously addressed questions of borders and nationality as defining axes of identity. In the following pages I will try to offer such a perspective through a reading of “The Jolly Corner,” a short story by Henry James that simultaneously mobilizes conceptions of gender, sexuality, and nation by making the crossing of borders one of its thematic nuclei.

The most prominent among the American citizens of his generation who permanently left the United States for Europe, and recently the object of a considerable number of biographical and critical studies

investigating his life and works from the standpoint of queer theory, Henry James would be himself an ideal candidate for a biographical discussion of the intersection between nationality and sexuality. It is, however, his recurring theme of the American expatriates’ life in Europe as combined with an unmistakable questioning of heteronormative sexuality that establishes him as a particularly keen and insightful observer of such an intersection and its consequentiality for the culture of his time. James’s assessment of the American society, which so many novels deploy through narratives of fatal encounters between the New and the Old World, becomes even sharper at the beginning of the twentieth century, both in his work as a critic (*The American Scene*) and in the fictional production following his brief return to the United States. This moment is perfectly represented by “The Jolly Corner,” which he started to write in 1906 and published in 1908.

Being a ghost story, “The Jolly Corner” quite expectedly features the crossing of borders as one of its main themes: borders between rationality and irrationality, between self and other, life and death, realistic fiction and narratives of supernatural events, consciousness and the unconscious, are all predictably probed, challenged, and violated in the story. Yet, there is a specific, historically determined and, in a certain sense, even physically tangible border that the text insistently foregrounds as absolutely relevant to the understanding of the story and the events it features: the border between nations, and more specifically, the physical distance and cultural divide between the United States and Europe. Moreover, in spite of all the possibilities for blurring the boundaries offered by the ghost story as a genre, the most consequential one in this particular case seems to be that between different articulations of masculinity that depend heavily on the geographical, and thus cultural, positioning of the protagonist. The intersection between gender definitions and national/transnational belongings is the main focus of the reading of “The Jolly Corner” that I am proposing in this article.

One of the most fascinating literary outcomes of James’s brief return to the United States, “The Jolly Corner” features a middle-aged protagonist, Spencer Brydon, who obsessively tries to grasp what his identity would have been had he not left New York for Europe when he was 23. Now 56 years old, Brydon spends the days of his long delayed stay in his native New York supervising the works in one of his properties that will be converted to flats and absorbedly conversing with his old friend Alice Staverton on how a decision not to leave the States would have affected the evolution of his personality. His night time routine, however, is quite unusual: almost every night he visits at late hours the
cherished house of his childhood, the property he affectionately refers to by calling it “the jolly corner” and that he has made a decision not to sell or make any profit on. Walking from one empty room to another in the dim street light penetrating from the windows, he “hunts” a spectral presence there, a “ghost” he comes to understand as being just that alter ego that a hypothetical life in America would have made of him. When he is finally confronted by the haunting figure just when he had chosen to renounce such a fatal encounter, he collapses to the floor, horrified by the vision of a ravaged, maimed man that he refuses to recognize as his own other self.

Compared with other popular Jamesian short stories, “The Jolly Corner” has received relatively little critical attention. Yet, the striking variety of theoretical approaches and critical categories deployed in the existing readings of the text implicitly confirms its semantic richness and structural complexity, its pervasive indeterminacy not only accommodating but inviting different analyses. Often interpreted, especially in the past, as an (autobiographical) investigation of the theme of possibilities and choice, it has been also analyzed in terms of psychoanalytic narcissism and, more recently, as a narrative of homosexual panic and racial otherness. Critics concerned with the formal aspects of the text, on the other hand, have read it as a purely linguistic and narrative rendering of the creative process leading to the elaboration of fictional characters, while the narrative of time and space disarticulation has drawn attention to the coeval development of the theory of relativity. While recognizing the illuminating contribution that such diversity of approaches has brought to the understanding of several aspects of the story, with regard to issues of gender and sexuality my hypothesis is that “The Jolly Corner” does not produce a questioning of a single identity (be it heteronormative or not), but actually stages several projections of possible, alternative masculinities, all of them articulated along the defining axis of nationality and geographic-cultural positioning, while marked as phantasmatic in their being constantly projected, yet never fully realized in the course of the narration.

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At least four different male identities are in fact staged along the narrative by the protagonist, Spencer Brydon, four performances of gender evoking different declinations of sexuality and in which the crossing of national and cultural borders constitutes a powerful and significant moment of both (re)definition and displacement of the self. I would term these four identifications as the queer, non heteronormative masculinity of his European life; the performance of the American entrepreneur; the ghostly *alter ego* he conjures up and meets in the house; and the apparently heteronormative identity he performs at the end of the story.

The very first pages of “The Jolly Corner” focus on the continuous, conscious comparison Brydon makes between his experience of Europe and the American society he is observing again after 33 years. However, his life as an expatriate is never really described, nor is the reader given any detail about his social life abroad, his material circumstances, or his actual everyday activities; his vague references to what a critic has called a “life of unspecified dissipation”3 are all the reader is left with. In his ongoing assessment of radically divergent circumstances of everyday life, “Europe” is evoked as the counterpart to something specifically American and is twice referred to in quotation marks, as an all-encompassing synecdoche for unutterable experiences that are simply not understandable within the limits of that American culture the protagonist had fled in his youth. In the first occurrence, we nearly have the narrator’s acknowledgement of the essentially parasitic character of Brydon’s life abroad, which is made possible exactly by the high profits deriving from that all-American concern for wealth he so radically despises: “He could live in ‘Europe,’ as he had been in the habit of living, on the product of these flourishing New York leases.”4 With this apparently offhand remark, the narrative voice thus unveils immediately the contradiction lying at the heart of Brydon’s life trajectory, his European years being actually an emanation of his denied Americanness. On the second occasion, Brydon is considering the shared knowledge of a past era that fosters his friendship with the all-American Alice Staverton, while at the same time noticing the crucial difference his experience as an expatriate introduces between them:

[S]he was as exquisite for him as some pale pressed flower […] They had communities of knowledge, ‘their’ knowledge (this discriminating possessive was always on her lips) of presences of the other age,

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presences all overlaid, in his case, by the experience of a man and the freedom of a wanderer, overlaid by pleasure, by infidelity, by passages of life that were strange and dim to her, just by ‘Europe’ in short (552).

Here as elsewhere in the course of their renewed friendship, Alice tries to obtain from Brydon a recognition on his part of the exclusive and particularly intimate nature of their acquaintance, while the self-centered man eludes her pressing demand by privately cultivating and relishing the distance his European years have put between them. Whatever shared knowledge of a bygone New York the two have, in Brydon’s unuttered view of the matter his companion’s penetration of life itself in incommensurably hampered by her lack of experiences like his own. Alice is in Brydon’s eyes a still, frozen picture of the past (“a pale pressed flower”), whose perception is overlaid by no cosmopolitan awareness, a perfect mirror assisting his narcissistic reflections about his past life and current observations. It is worth pointing out how the European life to which the passage refers is clearly defined as a specifically male possibility, closely connected to the construction of a male subjectivity, and is thus perceived by Brydon as an unbridgeable gap between his friend and himself. The problem of self-definition across national borders or through cosmopolitan experience is in other words perceived by Brydon as an all-male one, as is further confirmed by another conversation between the two focusing on the crossing of borders as a powerful act of self-definition, in which he fails to meet another of Alice’s acute, slant comments on how his past life abroad has affected their relationship:

“It comes over me that I had then a strange alter ego deep down somewhere within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud, and that I just took the course, I just transferred him to the climate that blighted him for once and for ever. [...] I was leading, at any time these thirty years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life. And you see what it has made of me.”

She just waited, smiling at him. “You see what it has made of me.”

“Oh you’re a person whom nothing can have altered. You were born to be what you are anywhere, anyway: you’ve the perfection nothing else could have blighted.” (557-8)

As he had done in comparing Alice to a pressed flower, again Brydon resorts to a floral image to explain his perception of an undeveloped personality, of possibilities fatally foreclosed by that very crossing of the national borders that enabled the flourishing of another self shaped by expatriation itself: “And you see what it has made of me.” As in her
earlier attempt at establishing their common New York past as the possible ground for a more intimate relationship between them, here too Alice Staverton tries to shift Brydon’s attention from his totally self-centered concerns to a perception of how his way of life affected her as well: “You see what it has made of me.” Alice’s remark, directly following Brydon’s, seems quite unequivocally referred to his European “selfish scandalous life” as the cause of her condition, that is, of her still being waiting for him. But Brydon fails to immediately get her insinuation and refers her statement back to his own question earlier in the exchange (“What would it [life in the United States] have made of me?”) and to his understanding of possible outcomes of personality as being more or less blighted by the cultural climate assisting its development. Thus, not only does he elude her vaguely accusing retort, but he even fixes her in an image of timeless perfection impermeable to life and experiences, a reassuring and unchanging point of reference for his much more mobile self. Expatriation, as this remark indirectly confirms, is for Brydon a gendered experience, one that has deeply affected him as a man, but would not produce the same impression on a woman – a position foregrounding geopolitical borders as paramount in the definition of American turn-of-the-century masculinity. However, all the vocabulary through which the idea of “Europe” and of exclusively male European adventures is evoked actually deserves closer attention. Experience, freedom, pleasure, infidelity, selfish[ness], scandalous passages of life that cannot but be strange and obscure to the woman listener: in short, an unmistakable though ambiguous sensuality pervades the hazy description of Brydon’s time on the other side of the Atlantic.

Other moments in the text dealing with recollections or descriptions of European life are equally evocative, equally allusive, equally susceptible of ambiguous interpretation in terms of gender and sexuality. Brydon calls “guilt” his long absence and his “averted mind,” and speculating with his friend on what his life would have been in America, he thus qualifies his choice to leave it: “And then the beauty of it – I mean of my perversity, of my refusal to agree to a ‘deal’ – is just in the total absence of a reason” (556, my emphasis). And again:

Not to have followed my perverse young course – and almost in the teeth of my father’s curse, as I may say; not to have kept it up, so, ‘over there,’ from that day to this, without a doubt or a pang; not above all to have liked it, to have loved it, so much, loved it, no doubt, with such an abysmal conceit of my own preference: some variation from that, I say, must have produced some different effect for my life and for my ‘form.’ (557, my emphasis)
Brydon’s (and James’s) insistence on the use of “perverse” and “perversity” as key terms in the otherwise scantily described choice of a course of life so different from society’s and family’s expectations resonates with the pathologizing discourses on sexuality and gender that at the turn of the century – and precisely through definitions of deviant behavior and identities – marks a shift in power and control over bodies, from the church and the family to medical science and state institutions. As Brydon acutely observes, a non-perverse choice to stay in America, or at least a less perverse decision to shorten his European adventure, would have affected not only the material circumstances of his life, but his very perception of himself, his own sense of identity, what he refers to as his “form.” It is interesting to note how Brydon’s speculations on the subject of his perversity faithfully reproduce the rhetorical structure of warnings against deviant behavior as positively corrupting and affecting the very nature of the person. Furthermore, the curiosity Brydon shows toward what he would have been if he had accepted normativity as the axis of his life trajectory, echoes the motif of the path not chosen, which usually refers to risks not taken. Yet, the accumulation of negatives produces an ironic vertigo in which the warning is turned against non-perversity and the curiosity is directed to normative choices. This cluster of allusions to beauty, love, perversion is the only way through which the idea of ‘Europe’ as lifestyle is substantiated in the text and thus functions here as a metonymical strategy that allows for the discursive recovery of otherwise silenced experiences.

James’s defining the choice of Europe over America as perverse, guilty, rebellious, though also beautiful and fulfilling, seems curiously reminiscent, albeit with subversive results, of Roosevelt’s invective against “this émigré,” “the undersized man of letters, who flees his country because he, with his delicate, effeminate sensitiveness finds the conditions of life on this side of the water crude and raw.” As is well known, with his rejection of the American expatriate intellectual, and his obsessive criticism of Henry James in particular as the most spectacular representative of the category, Roosevelt established and repeatedly affirmed a fundamental equivalence between Americanness and masculinity. The mere fact of having chosen to live outside the virilizing boundaries of the nation is interpreted as the expatriate intellectual’s confession of his inadequacy in terms of the performance of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, as James’s references to beauty and happiness witness,

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the same gesture can also be read as a subversive move, that is, as a conscious rejection of this gender role and an implicit rebellion to heteronormativity. In other words, if in the light of heteronormative injunctions leaving America is evidence enough of a sense of inadequacy with respect to the hyper-virility propounded and imposed by the Rooseveltian ethos of masculinity, the refusal to identify with the successful-man-of-action model of manhood motivates several intellectuals and aesthetes to seek refuge outside the oppressive borders of American compulsory heterosexuality. The absolute absence of any “pang” of “doubt” about the path chosen, the abiding enjoyment pervading Brydon’s thirty-three years abroad turn what Roosevelt defined in terms of inadequacy into a conscious rejection of an unsatisfying role model and into an active choice of positively embracing pleasure and freedom.

However, the way of life Brydon is so careful to covertly reveal refers to an identity no longer fully experienced and lived since Brydon’s return on American soil, where there is no beauty, no perversity (or perversion), no love, at least not of the kind he has experienced “over there.” While consistently connoting “Europe” as a place where a life of beautiful, selfish perverse choices is made possible, James nonetheless complicates the dichotomies produced by the Rooseveltian assessment of masculinity and Americanness. Through Brydon’s words and observations he introduces the idea of a certain queerness in connection with his character’s recent experience of his native land, an experience marked by his intense reaction to “the differences, the newnesses, the queernesses, above all the bignesses, for the better or the worse, that at present assaulted his vision wherever he looked.” (550, my emphasis)

The vertigo produced by this intense cultural confrontation results for Brydon in a fascination, among other things, exactly with the social role and the privileges of the wealthy, assertive entrepreneur that constitutes the hegemonic model of American masculinity. Nearly as if he were carried away by the very fact of being in New York, in the midst of the city’s relentless development, Brydon starts to experience an unknown and totally unexpected pleasure in personally supervising the works in one of his properties, thus performing for the first time in his life a gender role he had rejected early in his youth as being marked by vulgarity and ugliness. I quote again from the first part of the story, characterized by a continuous alternation between reminiscences of European beauty and the newly discovered pleasures of American practicality:

he loafed about his ‘work’ undeterred, secretly agitated; not in the least ‘minding’ that the whole proposition, as they said, was vulgar and sordid, and ready to climb ladders, to walk the plank, to handle materials and look wise about them, to ask questions, in fine, and challenge explanations and really ‘go into’ figures. (552)

And again, while showing his friend Alice the works in progress at his apartment-house:

he had helped her over gaps and explained to her plans, and while they were there had happened to have, before her, a brief but lively discussion with the man in charge […] He had found himself quite ‘standing up’ to this personage over a failure on the latter’s part to observe some detail of one of their noted conditions. (553)

As these passages clearly show, and as the acute Alice Staverton quickly realizes, what makes the role of the American entrepreneur so attractive and gratifying for Brydon is the degree of authority and power it allows him to deploy. In other words, if fleeing from American compulsory heterosexuality and the anxieties it generates allowed him to constitute alternative spaces for his enjoyment of freedom and beauty, the subjection to its rules leads him on the other hand to an acquisition of privileges and an acknowledgement of power that make heteronormative maleness still a desirable identity in his eyes. And, again nearly embodying Roosevelt’s principles for the assessment of men’s performance of their gender role – “play[ing] a man’s part among men”7 – Brydon starts to seek and obtain a form of social validation of his new position through the homosocial dynamics of the confrontation with other men and the display of authority in front of women. Brydon thus constructs, elaborates, and lives his fantasy of being a man of privilege and power, a narcissistic fantasy of an ideal self as it could be, thus projecting another male identity that, as we will see, he actually does not completely succeed in realizing. He fantasizes in fact of being an American entrepreneur, even while retaining his intellectual and aesthetic distinction, and this is exactly what makes such a projected identity the image of an ideal self, simultaneously constituting the main hindrance to its full realization. The image of the aesthete so self-aware of his climbing ladders and walking planks, arguing about the works with the man in charge, nearly amounts, in fact, to a camp performance of American entrepreneurship, undermining the authority and normativity of the model at the very moment of its most genuine

7 Roosevelt, “True Americanism,” 40.
appreciation and performance by the protagonist. Moreover, once again James plays with the reader's expectations, subtly subverting the use of a recurring theme in the fiction of the time. In fact, while many tales dealing with states of double consciousness or ghostly appearances clearly use the tropes of the “stranger within” and of the “dormant self” as coded images for the denied, repressed homosexual self, in “The Jolly Corner” it is the man of business – that is, the heteronormative, socially recognized self – that is dormant and hidden inside Spencer Brydon: “These virtues, so common all around him now, had been dormant in his own organism” (551).

Alice Staverton’s opinion, however – offered just after Brydon’s discussion with another man has taken place in front of her – that in leaving the States he had “clearly for too many years neglected a real gift” and that “had he but stayed at home he would have anticipated the inventor of the sky-scraper” (553) flatters his narcissistic investment in this fantasy and actually intensifies his obsession with the question of his destiny had he stayed at home: “what would it have made of me?” (557) becomes the sole preoccupation of the protagonist. Through what he calls the “[cultivation of] his whole perception” (563), he hopes to get to a clear vision of this ungraspable alter ego that he now identifies as the mysterious, ghostly personage that inhabits the house on the jolly corner.

The presence that he finally meets, or better, is confronted with against his will, and that even attacks him, though, is a very different figure from the one he had narcissistically “cultivated” through his repeated visits to the house: what he sees in fact is not the powerful, self-confident, authoritative figure able to anticipate the “inventor of the skyscraper,” but a maimed, ravaged man that he refuses to recognize as his other self, a vision that suddenly destroys all his self-flattering projections on the possible formidable outcomes of an American career, leaving him devastated by the deepest sense of alienation. By cultivating his obsessive fantasy of a totally different alter ego from the standpoint of privilege, culture, and sensitivity provided by his past life as an aesthete and a leisured expatriate, Brydon could not escape self-deception and disappointment. The pain he sees in the ghost’s face and his horrifying mutilation of two fingers are the measure of a life that has not experienced that beauty, love, and perversity that shaped his own.

Terror, however, had already awakened him to the eventually devastating consequences of his curiosity some time before the paralyzing sight of his alter ego. In conjuring it up, Brydon had nurtured the idea of seeing the full-blown flower of his Americanness and had even enjoyed for a moment an inebriating sense of his own power in hunting the
spectral presence, subverting any previous notion of the relation between the real and the apparitional world: “People enough, first and last, had been in terror of apparitions, but who had ever before so turned the tables and become himself, in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror?” (562). But Brydon will only too briefly enjoy the illusion of such an advantage over his other self, becoming soon aware of his own loss of control over the whole situation. Sensing the very presence of the ghost behind a door, Brydon has to admit to himself that the stranger can inspire as much fear as he, “rejoicing that he could, in another form, actively inspire that fear, and simultaneously quaking for the form in which he might passively know it” (564). He also realizes that, for all his pride in having given it life by “[cultivating] his whole perception” (563), the two of them equally occupy a very precarious space of identity:

Ah this time at last they were, the two, the opposed projections of him, in presence; and this time, as much as one would, the question of danger loomed. With it rose, as not before, the question of courage – for what he knew the blank face of the door to say to him was “Show us how much you have!” (566)

None of them is, in other words, more real than the other, the two being merely projected identities competing for supremacy and testing their own as well as each other’s masculinity. The challenge and the inherently violent confrontation implied in the Rooseveltian ethos of the “Show us how much you have!” (my emphasis) perfectly illustrate how the notion of an American hegemonic masculinity covered, displacing it on issues of race and sexuality, the unsolved and actually irreconcilable contradiction lying at the heart of early twentieth-century American manhood, namely its evocation of shared privileges and a sense of commonality on the one hand, and the violent competition opposing man to men on the other.8

In such a situation, the real American man is the one who masters the other. But Brydon, for the first time fully aware of the dangerous implications for him of any outcome of the confrontation, turns away from his own desire of seeing and chooses self-preservation instead. If, as he believes, leaving the United States has allowed him to cultivate a self at the expense of another, the opposite course would have necessarily prevented him from developing that personality he now recognizes as his own (“I know at least who I am” [558]), denying it the right cultural

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8 See Nelson, National Manhood.
climate to grow. He thus realizes that he can have it both ways only as long as he keeps his experimental identifications at the level of projections and performances. Any attempt to get to a more “tangible” form of identity would inevitably produce a stiffening in self-perception that would hamper the shifting mobility characterizing him. The performance of the American compulsory heteronormative masculinity is in fact based exactly on the denial and repression of any non-normative manifestation of the self, non-normativity including both sexual transgression and cosmopolitan aspirations.

Brydon thus choses “discretion,” which is, as the saying goes, the better part of value, not so much “because it saved his nerves or his skin, but because, much more valuably, it saved the situation” (567). With his idea of discretion, he actually re-enacts the move he made in his youth, re-conceptualizing as a free and morally superior choice what others would impute to a kind of inadequacy on his part, and more specifically, in both cases, to a lack of masculinity.

In the final section of the story Brydon recovers from the collapse following his dramatic encounter with the “ghost,” his head resting on Alice Staverton’s lap. It is the chance she finally takes to disclose her romantic feelings to him, a mute confession made of kisses and smiles that he passively receives and thus encourages. This is the last projection of a male identity Brydon performs in the story, that of a normative heterosexual self. Though the episode has been sometimes read as an optimistic ending leading to the establishment of a romantic, heterosexual bond, James’s careful choice of words actually constructs the whole scene as a moment of re-birth, featuring a loving, nurturing mother and a totally dependent child. Spencer Brydon comes back to his senses in Alice Staverton’s lap which she had made into “an ample and perfect cushion to him” (572), a slow awakening to a state of utter helplessness which far from distressing him, turns “this rich return of consciousness” into “the most wonderful hour [...] that he had ever known, leaving him [...] so gratefully, so abysmally passive” (572). When, moments after, he sees Alice Staverton’s face hanging lovingly over him “in a way that showed how he was still propped and pillowed” (573), Brydon experiences the most primitive sense of comfort and safety: “he was as much at peace as if he had had food and drink” (573). And when he finally speaks again, it is to confess: “I can only have died. You brought me literally to life” (573), a peculiar phrasing, since, having been alive for 56 years already before the fatal adventure, all that Alice could have done for him was to bring him back to life. Likewise, deeply disappointed by her expression of sorrow and pity for this “black
stranger” who “has been unhappy... [and] ravaged,” Brydon reacts with typical and narcissistic jealousy, asking this mother-like woman to reassure him about her exclusive love: “And haven’t I been unhappy? Am I not – you’ve only to look at me! – ravaged?” ‘Ah I don’t say I like him better” (576). If this crescendo of Oedipal images (further confirmed by the setting of the whole scene in the much cherished house of Brydon’s childhood) is to be interpreted as the blooming of a heterosexual attachment, the male identity it foregrounds is still distinctly non-normative, showing traits – such as passivity, helplessness, dependence – that the dominant cultural discourse attributed only to children and, significantly, women.

With its kaleidoscopic projection of male gender identities, always undermined at the very moment of their representation – from the “perverse” Europeanized aesthete fascinated by the dominant model of heteronormative American masculinity to the “camp” performance of the authoritative entrepreneur, from the phantasmatic and maimed alter ego of an un-lived life to the childish middle-aged man pleading for exclusive love – “The Jolly Corner,” far from being the uncovering of any specific definition of masculinity, strikes me as another brilliant Jamesian fictional questioning of the very idea of a stable, “essential” identity and an equally brilliant rendering of the unconsciously performative character of gender. By constantly foregrounding the issue of geopolitical borders as a specifically relevant one, this story further produces a subtle questioning of a contemporary ideal of manhood – blending concepts of sexuality, gender, nationality, and race – that circulated a simultaneously reassuring and anxious narrative of male identity as white, heterosexual, American. Through the character of Spencer Brydon, James first of all constitutes expatriation as a space in-between geopolitical borders where what is in excess to American male identity (refinement, ambiguity, taste, pleasure, perversion), as well as to any other nationally inflected gender and sexual norm, can find a safe mode of expression and growth. Then, in having his protagonist preserve his mobility and non-normativity till the very end of the story, not only does James produce a most passive and helpless, hence ironic straight lover, but more significantly denies America its virilizing powers at the very moment of Brydon’s choice to remain in the United States with his now beloved Alice Staverton, thus fully reinscribing queerness at the heart of Americanness.
Works Cited


