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## Getting at “The Figure in the Carpet”

According to Wolfgang Iser, “The Figure in the Carpet” by Henry James is concerned with questions of the nature of literary meaning. In Iser’s paradigmatic interpretation James’s story juxtaposes two radically different conceptions of meaning: according to one, meaning is something to be found in the text itself and the critic’s job is precisely to “dig up” that meaning. According to the other, meaning is only structured, but not contained, by the text: meaning comes into being in the very process of reading, as reader and text interact with each other. Iser thinks it is this second view of literary meaning James subscribes to. As opposed to Iser, I place the interpretation of James’s story in the context of Romanticism. In this reading, it is not two different conceptions of meaning that James juxtaposes, but two different modes of reading. One, exemplified by the narrator of the story, is superficial, journalistic, and platitudinous; the other, represented by Corvick and Gwendolyn, is passionate and profound and reflects James’s own Romantic theory of reading. I also analyze a number of different theoretical texts by James, thus attempting to work out a more convincing hermeneutic fore-structure for interpreting the story than that of Iser’s.

The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendency of their own nature, – him they will suffer.

(Emerson, “The Poet”)

One must be an inventor to read well.

(Emerson, “The American Scholar”)

And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.

(*The Revelation of Saint John*)

In his Preface to the New York edition of “The Figure in the Carpet,” Henry James said he

came to Hugh Vereker . . . by this travelled road of a generalization; the habit of having noted for many years how strangely and helplessly, among

us all, what we call criticism . . . is apt to stand off from the intended sense of things.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically enough, it is very much this “standing off from the intended sense” that has characterized the reception of “The Figure in the Carpet.”<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Iser’s interpretation in his *Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, which Mihály Szegedy-Maszák has called “the most important to date,”<sup>3</sup> is a case in point.<sup>4</sup>

According to Iser “The Figure in the Carpet” “can be considered as a prognosis for . . . that form of interpretation which is concerned first and foremost with the meaning of a literary work,” insofar as it “directly anticipates [the] demise” of that type of criticism (3).<sup>5</sup> James, says Iser, “has given a very clear account of two totally

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1. Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers; Other European Writers; The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1235.

2. This is, of course, not to say that the critic’s job would be to discover the author’s intentions before or during writing. If “[t]here are no interpretations but only misinterpretations” (Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], p. 95), then the question is not whether one’s reading approximates the “true meaning” of the text, but whether one’s misinterpretation is, in Bloom’s terminology, weak or strong, dull or imaginative, dead or alive. By “standing off from the intended sense of things” James does not mean “missing the author’s consciously intended meaning,” as if he thought there is one correct meaning of a work of literature; he means failing to read literature redemptively in general. For in James’s mind, as I attempt to show in this paper, imaginative literature is meant to work out its own salvation in the reader. For James it is literature itself that has a “religious” intention, and it is missing this intention, as opposed to some psychological state of the author, that he sees as the greatest mistake a reader (a critic) can make.

3. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, “Henry James and Reader-Response Criticism (*The Figure in the Carpet*),” *Neohelicon* XXVII/1 (2000) 61–67, p. 62.

4. Although in my paper I do raise some questions concerning Iser’s theory of aesthetic response (at least as it was originally put forward in his *Act of Reading*), my primary concern is not with his theory, but only with his interpretation of “The Figure in the Carpet.” Accordingly, what I am arguing against is not Iser’s theory of reading – which in itself is not contradictory to James’s views – but what I deem to be his weak misreading of James’s story. For a concise reception-history of the story see Szegedy-Maszák, “Henry James and Reader-Response Criticism.”

5. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

different approaches to the fictional text": One, according to which "meaning is . . . an object to be defined," and the other, according to which it is "an effect to be experienced" (10). In other words, James's story does not only anticipate the demise of the type of criticism whose foremost question is "What does this story mean?" (a question then answered by a proposition), but it also anticipates Iser's theory of aesthetic response put forward in his *Act of Reading*.

"At the very beginning of the story," Iser starts his analysis,

the narrator – whom we shall call the critic – boasts that in his review he has revealed the hidden meaning of Vereker's latest novel, and he now wonders how the writer will react to the "loss of his mystery." If interpretation consists in forcing the hidden meaning from a text, then it is only logical to construe the process as resulting in a loss for the author. (4)

As we can see, the narrator-critic's views in Iser's interpretation come to represent the type of criticism of which Iser disapproves; Vereker, on the other hand, "denounces both the archeological ('digging for meaning') approach and the assumption that meaning is a thing" (5): When he approves of the narrator's suggestion that perhaps the meaning of his novels is like a figure in a Persian carpet, he gives evidence of his understanding of meaning as something that is "imagistic in character" (8), and is "the product of an interaction between textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension" (9). It is obvious that Iser considers Vereker's view to be an anticipation of his own theory of aesthetic response.<sup>6</sup>

Iser, of course, does not say that the meaning of "The Figure in the Carpet" is that "meaning in literature is non-propositional;" that would obviously be a paradoxical proposition. He nevertheless unequivocally declares that James's story is "a very clear account of two totally different approaches to the fictional text" (10). In light of Iser's dictum, according to which the critic's job should be "not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects" (18),

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6. While Iser does not think that James's purpose in writing "The Figure in the Carpet" was "to make a forecast about the future of literary criticism" (p. 3), Mihály Szegedy-Maszák goes much further than him when, citing James's Preface to *Roderick Hudson* in the New York edition, he says: "Other texts by James could also be cited to disprove Iser's claim that *The Figure in the Carpet* represents an 'unconscious' anticipation of certain interpretative strategies" (p. 64). Though Szegedy-Maszák – as opposed to Iser – makes a point of incorporating his interpretation into the whole of James's oeuvre, he never refers to James's Preface to "The Figure in the Carpet," a text I consider to be of central importance to its interpretation.

when he says “clear account,” he cannot mean that this “clear account” would constitute the “meaning,” or “message,” of the text, but rather that it is part of its “‘performing’ structure” that initiates a “performance of meaning” in the reader (27), which in this case would be an experience of him “becoming aware of his own prejudices,” most of all that “meaning is a message or a philosophy of life” (8).

This raises the question whether Iser’s implicit claim to have revealed the “performing structure” of James’s story is valid, and whether this “performing structure” (going along with Iser, for now, let us not call it an interpretation yet) he assumes to be there in the text is, to paraphrase Heidegger’s famous words, worked out in terms of James’s art itself (195).<sup>7</sup>

### The Hermeneutic Situation

Iser’s concept of the “implied reader” works both as a safeguard against arbitrary interpretation, and as an element that liberates reading from the obsessing quest after the “true” meaning. Texts contain “intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning-production” (25), instructions that prestructure “the role to be assumed” by the reader: “The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him” (34).

From a hermeneutic perspective the first question this naturally raises is how one can separate what is merely “structure,” and “instruction” – or, in other words, what is really there in the text – from the performance of the reader who assumes the role offered him by the text, if this “structure” cannot be accessed apart from a concrete act of reading. For the understanding of even a single word in a text, according to the Heideggerian (i.e. temporal, existential, and non-essentialist) conception of the hermeneutic circle,

is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented<sup>8</sup> to us. If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual Interpretation, one likes to appeal [beruft] to what ‘stands there,’ then one finds that what ‘stands there’ in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption [Vormeinung] of the person who does the interpreting. In an interpretative approach there

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7. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962).

8. In the German “eines Vorgegebenen,” i.e. “of a fore-given,” a meaning that is already there before our act of interpretation, waiting to be understood.

lies such an assumption, as that which has been 'taken for granted' [gesetzt] with the interpretation as such – that is to say, as that which has been presented<sup>9</sup> in our fore-having, our fore-sight, and our fore-conception.

(191–192)

Heidegger denies that texts (objects) have an *essentia*, an intrinsic nature, an essential meaning, that we (subjects) are to grasp in an act of interpretation: Meaning is never "fore-given" in the text. Nevertheless, he does not think that the hermeneutic circle is a vicious circle, in which case all interpretations would have to be accepted as equally valid (or equally invalid), since everyone would be equally and eternally entrapped in their prejudices. For sure, there is no way out of the circle, but "[w]hat is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way" (195). Heidegger's hermeneutic circle is *temporal* – as opposed to it being spatial, in which case it indeed would be like a prison – therefore, even though understanding is never a presuppositionless grasping of bare facts, we can nevertheless – indeed we must – again and again re-evaluate our interpretation of things with the emergence of what Richard Rorty calls new vocabularies that seem to be more suitable for our purposes.<sup>10</sup> Heidegger put it this way:

This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move . . . our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.

(195)

Iser's implicit claim to have only been revealing the "performing structure" of "The Figure in the Carpet" instead of telling us what the story means is therefore highly problematic, since our "recognition" of a structure in the text is always derived from our understanding of that text, and never vice versa.<sup>11</sup> When Iser asks the critic "not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects" (18), what he is really asking is that the critic keep her interpretation of

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9. Again "vorgegeben ist," i.e. "that which is fore-given."

10. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3–22.

11. For example: "interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former" (Heidegger, p. 188); "Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted" (194).

the text to herself, and present the text's "performing structure" as arising *ex nihilo*, when in reality this "performing structure" is derived from the very act of interpretation she is not supposed to get enmeshed in.

A comparison of Iser's and Szegedy-Maszák's texts will amply illustrate this point. The narrator of James's story reports that Corvick, his friend, himself a critic, claims to have found the "figure" in Vereker's work; Corvick's claim is later also confirmed by Gwendolen, his wife. Iser thinks that Corvick, as opposed to the narrator, realizes that by "figure" Vereker meant "image," thus he comes to understand that "meaning is imagistic in character" (8). It is indeed because of this imagistic nature of his finding that "he cannot explain or convey the meaning [he has found] as the [narrator] seeks to do" (10). Szegedy-Maszák, on the other hand – though he is otherwise sympathetic to Iser's interpretation – is convinced that Corvick's claim to have found the figure "can be dismissed as unjustifiable":

The fact that Corvick believes that he has acquired "the final knowledge" and so appropriation is a finite process proves that he is even less qualified to understand Vereker's novels than the narrator, who records his confession of failure, candidly admitting that he is unable "to trace the figure in the carpet through every convolution, to reproduce it in every tint."<sup>12</sup>

In Szegedy-Maszák's understanding, James's "use of the word 'figure,' meaning both 'character' and 'figure of speech,' leads to the suggestion that meaning is either undecided or absent."<sup>13</sup> Thus in his view the quest was doomed to failure from the start, since the "figure" is not something that can actually be found.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Szegedy-Maszák, p. 67.

13. Szegedy-Maszák, p. 64.

14. Szegedy-Maszák's interpretation is a lot more consistent than Iser's, since it does not require of him to lean over backwards to explain the contradiction that even though what the critics are looking for should not be something that can be "found" Corvick apparently does find it. According to Iser, as we have seen, Corvick does find the "meaning" of Vereker's novels, but because of its nature (non-propositional, imagistic), he "cannot explain or convey" it to the narrator. This explanation is unconvincing. There is nothing in the story that would suggest that the "thing" Corvick has "found" is something that cannot be put into words – that is exactly what makes the narrator's situation so maddening: He knows that Corvick knows, Gwendolen makes it absolutely clear that she "heard everything" (Henry James, "The Figure in the Carpet," *Selected Tales*, ed. John Lyon [London and New York: Penguin, 2001], 284–313, p. 306; all parenthesized references are to this text, which is reprinted from the New York edition), and still he is denied knowledge. In Szegedy-Maszák's interpretation the contradiction disappears, since Corvick, and Gwendolen after

Do we have a disagreement here on the level of the authors giving an account of the "performing structure" of the text or on the level of the "performance of meaning" this structure has initiated in them? This is the wrong question to ask, because the intersubjectively given "performing structure" of the text should *by definition* be the same for all of us. The difference then must necessarily be due to the fact that the authors in their discourses on the text have already passed way beyond a mere disclosure of its "performing structure" into the realm of "performance" itself – if a "beyond" would have any meaning here. It should be clear then that Iser, in talking about "The Figure in the Carpet," has long left the ivory tower of pure theory and, to paraphrase Macbeth, is in the "blood" of everyday interpretation "stept in so far that, should" he "wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o're."<sup>15</sup>

And this leads to our second question: If Iser's discourse on "The Figure in the Carpet" is nothing else but a good old interpretation grounded in a fore-structure of understanding, is this fore-structure worked out in terms of James's art? What does Heidegger mean by "working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves" anyway? He certainly does not work out a *method* of interpretation; the reason for this, however, is not at all that the working out of such a method is outside the interests of *Being and Time*, but that according to Heidegger's understanding of the hermeneutic circle such a method *in principle* cannot be worked out:

Because understanding, in accordance with its existential meaning, is Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being, the ontological presuppositions of historiological knowledge transcend in principle the idea of rigour held in the most exact sciences. (195)

Working out such a method would really be only a misguided attempt at avoiding the hermeneutic circle itself, an attempt at securing a meaning thought to be really there in the object of inquiry. But understanding, for Heidegger, is not a reaching

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him, belong to the same old meaning hunter group of critics the narrator belongs to, only even worse, because they – unlike the narrator – actually believe they have found the "meaning" of Vereker's work. On the other hand, if we assume, as I do, that what Vereker wants the critics to "find" is indeed something that can be "found" and put into words, and Corvick indeed "finds" it and tells it to Gwendolen, there is no contradiction to explain to begin with.

15. See *Macbeth* 3.4.135–137.

out of a subject towards an object<sup>16</sup> in order to find its meaning, but a mode of our being in the world:

Meaning is an *existentiale* of Dasein, not a property attaching to entities, lying 'behind' them, or floating somewhere as an 'intermediate domain.' Dasein only 'has' meaning, so far as the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world can be 'filled in' by entities discoverable in that disclosedness. *Hence only Dasein can be meaningful.* . . . (193)

What are we to do then? How are we to work "out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves"? Certainly not by working out a method of interpretation. What Heidegger rather means is that we are "to recognize beforehand the essential conditions under which [interpretation] can be performed" (195); i.e. we are to see that the study of literature is not an exact science, and what is at stake is never whether an interpretation agrees with the correct meaning "attaching" to the text:

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. (190–191)

Since the "involvements" of texts must necessarily change in time, interpretation is a never-ending process. In our case it makes a world of a difference whether we have read James's Preface to "The Figure in the Carpet," or some of his other essays on criticism – not because such texts naturally reveal their author's intentions in writing his fictional works, but simply because – at least in James' case – of their explanatory power. Of course, part of this power is derived from our knowledge of the fact of their being written by the same natural person. But it does not follow from this that therefore all such comparative readings are the products of a naïve hermeneutics that takes an author's comments on his own work to be transparent pronouncements made by a speaking subject. James has been dead for nearly a century

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16. "But no sooner was the 'phenomenon of knowing the world' grasped than it got interpreted in a 'superficial,' formal manner. The evidence for this is the procedure (still customary today) of setting up knowing as a 'relation between subject and Object' – a procedure in which there lurks as much 'truth' as vacuity. But subject and Object do not coincide with Dasein and the world" (Heidegger, pp. 86–87).



– all we have now is texts he has left behind.<sup>17</sup> Whether any of these can reveal their author, Henry James Jr., is from a pragmatic point of view an indifferent, if not meaningless, question since *none* of his texts is accessible apart from an act of interpretation; in other words the theoretical texts do not, and cannot, offer us pronouncements from outside the Hermeneutic Circle. If anything actually amounts to an attempt at escaping the Hermeneutic Circle, it is the theoretical decision to shut everything out but the "text proper" of our interpretation. For our knowledge of the fact that "The Art of Fiction" and "The Figure in the Carpet" are texts written by the same natural person, Henry James Jr., should in no way be construed as knowledge that is extraneous to our understanding of these texts – no knowledge constitutes any such things as facts preceding understanding, and therefore being outside the Hermeneutic Circle.

Understanding is a temporal process, and it is this temporal dimension of understanding that makes it possible for us to be able to revise our interpretations. What Heidegger means then by not allowing the fore-structures of our understanding "to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves" (195) is that we must always keep on scrutinizing the "involvements" of our interpretation, lest they prove to be mere "fancies," and thus we must always remain open to the possibility of recognizing our views as – to use a pragmatist, non-essentialist vocabulary – no longer expedient. As William James emphatically put it: "[W]e have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood."<sup>18</sup>

Iser's interpretation of "The Figure in the Carpet" is then not "incorrect" in the sense of it not being in agreement with the true meaning of the text – we have deemed the use of the term "true meaning" no longer worth using<sup>19</sup> – but unconvincing. Under a scrutiny of its "involvements" Iser's interpretation turns out to be not so much an interpretation of "The Figure in the Carpet," but more like an amplification of Iser's own theory of aesthetic response *by* "The Figure in the Carpet": The fore-structures of Iser's interpretation are not worked out in terms of James's art; upon a

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17. What his comments were if he was alive is a question obviously beyond the interests of this paper.

18. *The Writings of William James*, ed. John D. McDermott (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. 438.

19. I am paraphrasing Rorty here: "the term 'intrinsic nature' is one which it would pay us not to use, an expression which has caused more trouble than it has been worth" (*Continuity, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 8).

close reading of “The Figure in the Carpet” in the context of James’s Preface to it in the New York edition as well as some of his other texts written on the subject of criticism, another picture emerges, one quite different from Iser’s.<sup>20</sup>

### James and Criticism

According to Iser’s interpretation the “focal point of *The Figure in the Carpet* is the meaning of Vereker’s last novel” (3):

At the very beginning of the story, the narrator – whom we shall call the critic – boasts that in his review he has revealed the hidden meaning of Vereker’s latest novel, and he now wonders how the writer will react to the “loss of his mystery.” If interpretation consists in forcing the hidden meaning from a text, then it is only logical to construe the process as resulting in a loss for the author. (4)

The “conflict” then evolves from the narrator-critic accidentally overhearing Vereker’s dismissing remark about how the reviewer of his novel “[d]oesn’t see anything” (288).

If we now make an attempt at clearing our mind of the dichotomy of meaning as proposition versus meaning as experience, a very different pattern comes to the surface. First of all, the narrator-critic is initially in no search of a “hidden meaning” of Vereker’s last novel at all; on the contrary, it is Vereker himself who plants the idea in his mind that there *is* something to be sought for in his work. Secondly, the narrator does not wonder, “how the writer will react to the ‘loss of his mystery.’” What Iser misses seeing is that the sentence “We had found out at last how clever he was, and he had had to make the best of the loss of his mystery” (286) should be read not as one expressing the narrator’s view, but as one reporting Vereker’s – highly ironic – words. In order to see this, the full paragraph must be quoted:

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20. I must press the point that by saying that “the fore-structures of Iser’s interpretation are not worked out in terms of James’s art” I do not mean to say that Iser’s interpretation is alien to the “true nature” of James’s art, as I do not want to say anything about things such as the “true nature” of James’s art. What I mean is that the *vocabulary* – in Rorty’s sense – Iser uses in *The Act of Reading* is less convincing than the vocabulary I am offering in my present paper to interpret James’s story. I believe that if one adopts my vocabulary, she will be in a better position to make sense of not only “The Figure in the Carpet,” but many of James’s other writings as well. My paper is meant to be a better *tool* for reading James than that of Iser’s.

When afterwards, in the course of our gregarious walk, I found myself for half an hour, not perhaps without another manoeuvre, at the great man's side, the result of his affability was a still livelier desire that he shouldn't remain in ignorance of the peculiar justice I had done him. It wasn't that he seemed to thirst for justice; on the contrary I hadn't yet caught in his talk the faintest grunt of a grudge – a note for which my young experience had already given me an ear. Of late he had had more recognition, and it was pleasant, as we used to say in *The Middle*, to see how it drew him out. He wasn't of course popular, but I judged one of the sources of his good humour to be precisely that his success was independent of that. He had none the less become in a manner the fashion; the critics at least had put on a spurt and caught up with him. We had found out at last how clever he was, and he had had to make the best of the loss of his mystery. I was strongly tempted, as I walked beside him, to let him know how much of that unveiling was my act; and there was a moment when I probably should have done so had not one of the ladies of our party, snatching a place at his other elbow, just then appealed to him in a spirit comparatively selfish. It was very discouraging: I almost felt the liberty had been taken with myself. (286)

Vereker talks with the happy resignation of the misunderstood author who has given up on trying to explain things to an uncomprehending public; reveling in irony, what he is really saying (in my paraphrase) is that the narrator and other critics like him have not even begun to understand his work: "Well, now that you've found out what makes my work tick, I think I'll just have to make the best of the loss of my mystery" meaning "Ah, forget it! I can't even start to explain it to you, you're all a bunch of dilettanti!" – to which the narrator's naive reaction is (to quote James's text now): "I was strongly tempted, as I walked beside him, to let him know how much of that unveiling was my act." Now that the narrator is looking back at the event he is fully aware of the fact that Vereker took him for a fool, which makes this recollection of his past reaction to Vereker's words self-mockingly ironic as well.

Such ironies are of course only detectable after at least two readings when we are fully aware of the fact that the person narrating the story is someone who has not only failed to discover Vereker's secret, but has virtually gone mad in the search. The narrator now (half crazily) smiles at his earlier smugness when not only did he fail to see anything, but did not even realize that there *was* anything to be seen.

For he is actually first convinced that "Vereker had made a fool" of him and that the "buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous *pose*" (293).

That the idea of Vereker's work having a "general intention" does not come from him is further confirmed by a mirror scene at the end of the story, in which he tries to find out what Vereker's "general intention" was from Drayton Deane, the last person alive that could possibly know it. But Deane looks into his face uncomprehendingly: "Vereker's books had a general intention?" I stared in my turn. "You don't mean to say you don't know it?" I thought for a moment he was playing with me" (311).

And the narrator's revenge, for all the madness he has gone through in not being able to find out what Vereker's "general intention" is, is doing the same thing to Deane Vereker did to him: Setting him out on what he believes to be a maddeningly hopeless search.

I saw the immediate shock throb away little by little and then gather again into waves of wonder and curiosity – waves that promised, I could perfectly judge, to break in the end with the fury of my own highest tides. I may say that to-day as victims of unappeased desire there isn't a pin to choose between us. The poor man's state is almost my consolation; there are really moments when I feel it to be quite my revenge. (312–313)

What the narrator is initially proud of, then, is "the peculiar justice [he] had done" Vereker (286); i.e. (this is what the reader is to think about the kind of review whose main characteristic is that it "does justice" to an author) he has written a dilettantish, superficial "panegyric" (287). As the narrator is an inexperienced, "aspiring young analyst,"<sup>21</sup> it is not without good reasons that Corvick has his doubts when asking him to help him out, hoping he would not be "silly" in his review:

"Silly – about Vereker! Why what do I ever find him but awfully clever?"

"Well, what's that but silly? What on earth does 'awfully clever' mean? For God's sake try to get *at* him. Don't let him suffer by our arrangement. Speak of him, you know, if you can, as *I* should have spoken of him."

I wondered an instant. "You mean as far and away the biggest of the lot – that sort of thing?"

Corvick almost groaned. "Oh you know, I don't put them back to back that way; it's the infancy of art!" (285)

But Corvick's fears materialize, and the narrator with his review does prove himself to be still in the infancy of the art of criticism; Corvick is dissatisfied with it (285), Vereker calls it "the usual twaddle," and, ironically, "a charming article" (287).

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21. James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1235.

What is wrong with his review is not that he has dug up a bunch of propositional meaning, as Iser thinks; he has actually – though not of any propositional meaning – “dug up” too little:

What he [Corvick] would have said, had he reviewed the new book, was that there was evidently in the writer’s inmost art something to *be* understood. I hadn’t so much as hinted at that: no wonder the writer hadn’t been flattered! I asked Corvick what he really considered he meant by his own supersubtlety, and, unmistakably kindled, he replied: “It isn’t for the vulgar – it isn’t for the vulgar!” (293)

The narrator could not “get at” Vereker, as Corvick wanted him to, because he has failed to read his work passionately. His review is, as Vereker says, written in “cheap journalese” (291): It is a collection of vulgar clichés, it is cheap journalism. James’s comment in his Preface speaks for itself:

I to *this* extent recover the acute impression that may have given birth to “The Figure in the Carpet,” that no truce, in English-speaking air, had ever seemed to me really struck, or even approximately strikeable, with our so marked collective mistrust of anything like close or analytic appreciation. . . .<sup>22</sup>

James, like Vereker, was dissatisfied with contemporary English criticism’s “curiosity never emerging from the limp state”; he perceived in it an “odd numbness of . . . sensibility,” the result of which he called “stand[ing] off from the intended sense of things.”<sup>23</sup> In a short essay, entitled “The Science of Criticism,” published in 1891, just five years before “The Figure in the Carpet,” James complained of the “vulgarity, the crudity, the stupidity . . . [of] the offhand review” that “has nothing in common with the art of criticism.”<sup>24</sup> But his problem with the “offhand review” is not that its author has the mistaken idea of meaning being a thing to be extracted from the text. James even says that the result of quality criticism is that the original work of art is “preserved by translation,” and that the critic “has to understand for others, to answer for them.” His problem is with the type of criticism that fails to bring literature alive, because it does not originate in a profound reading experience. For in James’s mind the only real difference between the work of the novelist and the work of the

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22. James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1234.

23. James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1235.

24. Henry James, “The Science of Criticism,” in *Literary Criticism*, 95–99, pp. 96, 95.

critic is that the critic “deals with life at second-hand as well as at first; that is, he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own.” When a critic writes about works of literature, he “has to make them as vivid and as free as the novelist makes *his* puppets.”<sup>25</sup> In this view, then, criticism is not a science, but as Harold Bloom puts it, “either part of literature or nothing at all”;<sup>26</sup> it either inscribes itself into the very history of imaginative literature in the manner of Longinus, Dr. Johnson, or William Hazlitt, or is nothing but journalism doomed to be discarded the moment it is put on paper.

James held criticism and the critic in extremely high esteem, so when Iser says that the “exalted position of the critic . . . [as] formulated by Carlyle . . . for James, just fifty years later, has already become a historic and invalid norm” (6), he is clearly mistaken, as the following passage from “The Science of Criticism” should amply demonstrate:

The critical sense is so far from frequent that it is absolutely rare, and the possession of the cluster of qualities that minister to it is one of the highest distinctions. It is a gift inestimably precious and beautiful . . . not only do I not question in literature the high utility of criticism, but I should be tempted to say that the part it plays may be the supremely beneficent one when it proceeds from deep sources, from the efficient combination of experience and perception. In this light one sees the critic as the real helper of the artist, a torch-bearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother. . . . [W]hen one considers the noble figure completely equipped – armed *cap-à-pie* in curiosity and sympathy – one falls in love with the apparition. It certainly represents the knight who has knelt through his long vigil and who has the piety of his office. For there is something sacrificial in his function, inasmuch as he offers himself as a general touchstone. . . . His life, at this rate, is heroic, for it is immensely vicarious. He has to understand for others, to answer for them; he is always under arms.<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, we do not find sentences in James such as Carlyle’s “the true Literary Man . . . is the light of the world; the world’s Priest: – guiding it, like a sacred Pillar of Fire, in its dark pilgrimage through the waste of Time,”<sup>28</sup> but the differ-

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25. James, “The Science of Criticism,” p. 99.

26. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. xix.

27. James, “The Science of Criticism,” pp. 98–99.

28. Quoted in Iser, p. 6.

ence is only one of diction: For a full appreciation of "The Figure in the Carpet" it is also crucial for us to see that James is a true heir to British and American Romanticism.

### James, Romanticism, and the Revelation of the Figure

In his *Psychological Novel* James biographer, Leon Edel, remarked that "the novel of subjectivity represents historically a return to romanticism";<sup>29</sup> a reading together of Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" and James' "The Art of Fiction" should make it clear that what James says of prose fiction is basically the same thing Wordsworth says of poetry.

The objective of Wordsworth's poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* was "to choose incidents and situations from common life" and "throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way" (*WP*, 595).<sup>30</sup> Therefore, though the raw material of poetry is "common life," the result is not meant to be a "realistic" depiction of an outside reality for its own sake; Art is seen not as a mirror held up to Nature, but as an expression of the artists experience of life: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (*WP*, 596).<sup>31</sup> As an effect of this kind of poetry, Wordsworth

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29. Leon Edel, *The Psychological Novel: 1900–1950* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), p. 140. Apart from this comment, Edel does not make out a case for James's Romanticism. Works that do make out a case for James's Romanticism include Daniel Mark Fogel's *Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), and Charles Schug's *The Romantic Genesis of the Modern Novel* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979).

30. All parenthesized references are to this edition: William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)," in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 594–611.

31. Romantic art posits itself as "the external manifestation of an ideal content which is itself an interiorized experience, the recollected emotion of a bygone perception" (Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], p. 100). Cf.: "While many major poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge – and to a great extent by Shelley and Keats – set out from and return to an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape, the outer scene is not presented for its own sake, but only as a stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking. The important romantic poems are in fact poems of feelingful meditation which, though often stimulated by a natural phenomenon, are concerned with central human problems. Wordsworth asserted that it is 'the Mind of Man' which is 'my haunt, and the main region of my song'" (M. H. Abrams, *A*

says, “the understanding of the [reader] . . . must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated” (*WP*, 597); indeed, for Wordsworth, “to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability [of being excited by common life] is one of the best services in which . . . a writer can be engaged” (*WP*, 598).<sup>32</sup> For the Romantics poetry is thus seen, to use M. H. Abrams’s term, as a means to the “apocalypse of imagination.”<sup>33</sup>

James, like Wordsworth before him, is not a “aesthete” (i.e. he does not think that the relationship between art and reality is unimportant): The “only reason for the existence of a novel,” he says, “is that it does attempt to represent life” (*AF*, 46).<sup>34</sup> This is of course not to say that Jonathan Freedman is not justified in calling James “a professionalized exponent of a purified form of aestheticism”<sup>35</sup> who helped “transform the volatile and unstable example of aestheticism in England into that more austere form of aestheticism we call modernism.”<sup>36</sup> But what divides James from fin de siècle aestheticism – his rejection of the idea that art must be subservient to morality while still believing that it can be morally beneficial – is precisely what unites him with the High Romantics. When Shelley says “Didactic

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*Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, p. 116). “Wordsworth’s Copernican revolution in poetry is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity, the loss of what a poem is ‘about’” (Harold Bloom, “The Internalization of Quest-Romance,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1970], 3–24, p. 8). The basic work on the subject is still M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

32. Coleridge’s wording is even more emphatic: “Mr. Wordsworth . . . was to purpose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand” (S. T. Coleridge, “Biographia Literaria,” in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, 634–654, p. 645).

33. M. H. Abrams, “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, 91–119, p. 107.

34. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Literary Criticism*, 44–65.

35. Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 182.

36. Jonathan Freedman, p. xxvii.



poetry is my abhorrence,"<sup>37</sup> he speaks for all the Romantics, who – in that sense – can surely all be called "aesthetes"; but as M. H. Abrams has show in the last chapter of *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the High Romantics also believed in the self-bettering power of poetry. It is therefore important to differentiate between Romantic aestheticism – something James endorsed – and fin de siècle aestheticism – which James rejected.<sup>38</sup>

But neither is James a "realist" (i.e. he does not think that art should be a faithful and objective representation of some singular reality),<sup>39</sup> for when he says a "novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life" (*AF*, 50), the emphasis is on "personal," and "impression." Since James's famous "definition" cries out for citation, it is often read without its context to the possible effect of it being understood as if it said "a novel is a slice of life, a direct presentation of reality itself," which is just about the direct opposite of what James really means to say. What James is saying is that a novel's possible ways of interesting its readers

are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. (*AF*, 49–50)

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37. Percy Bysshe Shelly, "Prometheus Unbound: Preface," in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, 422–425, p. 424.

38. "Aestheticism here [*The Portrait of a Lady*] is represented as a species of malevolence, indeed, as central to a hyperbolically understood form of evil. In the malevolent Gilbert Osmond, James creates a figure so spectacularly pestiferous as to have defined the lineaments of the aesthete for the next 50 years. . . ." James's goal in *The Portrait of a Lady* "is ultimately to perform the discrimination of aestheticisms we have seen his earlier fiction aspiring to achieve: to assert or define through the vehicle of Isabel Archer a stance in which aestheticism might be understood as being a positive, even redemptive model for the fictional act – a solution to the problems posed by aestheticism that his subsequent writings both build upon and critique" (Jonathan Freedman, pp. 145–146).

39. This of course does not mean that a work like *The Bostonians* is not *stylistically* realistic. But James – even in his stylistically most realistic work – is never interested in showing us how things "really are" (see his letter to H. G. Wells cited bellow), nor does he think that it is deliberately selecting the commonplace aspects of reality that makes a novel realistic. Thus he rejects as "little to the point" the romance-novel distinction as well ("Art of Fiction," p. 54–55).

What makes a novel realistic, then, according to James, is precisely the fact that while reading it we are experiencing someone else's experience of life – provided that it is intense enough.<sup>40</sup> James makes this point even clearer in another essay published in 1883, a year before “The Art of Fiction”:

The success of a work of art, to my mind, may be measured by the degree to which it produces a certain illusion; that illusion makes it appear to us for the time that we have lived another life – that we have had a miraculous enlargement of experience. The greater the art the greater the miracle . . . I am perfectly aware that to say the object of a novel is to represent life does not bring the question to a point so fine as to be uncomfortable for any one. . . . For, after all, may not people differ infinitely as to what constitutes life – what constitutes representation?<sup>41</sup>

His argument against H. G. Wells's charge of aestheticism is the same:

Of course for myself I live, live intensely and am fed by life, and my value, whatever it be, is in my own kind of expression of that. Therefore I am pulled up to wonder by the fact that for you my kind (my sort of sense of expression and sort of sense of life alike) doesn't exist; and that wonder is, I admit, a disconcerting comment on my idea of the various appreciability of our addiction to the novel and of all the personal and intellectual history, sympathy and curiosity, behind the given example of it. It is when that history and curiosity have been determined in the way most different from my own that I want to get at them – precisely *for* the extension of life, which is the novel's best gift.<sup>42</sup>

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40. James's emphasis on intensity speaks of another way he is indebted to the Romantics: See e.g. Keats's famous letter on “Negative Capability”: “the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth” (“To George and Tom Keats, December 21, 27 [?], 1817,” in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, 767–768, p. 767), or Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively . . . . The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (“A Defence of Poetry,” in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, 746–762, p. 750). On “intensity” in Romantic theory see also M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 132–138.

41. Henry James, “Alphonse Daudet,” in *Literary Criticism*, 223–249, p. 242.

42. Henry James, “Henry James to H. G. Wells July 10, 1915,” in *The Portable Henry James*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 483–485, p. 484.

When James says, therefore, that the novel's business is "to represent life," he means life as "it resides in the strong consciousness of [the artist] seeing all for himself"; for James the artist is "the modern alchemist" in whom his craft "renews . . . something like the old secret of life."<sup>43</sup> Like Wordsworth's, James's theory of art is essentially an expressive, i.e. Romantic, theory of art, according to which "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth" (*AF*, 64). These are words any of the High Romantics could have written, and if James's vocabulary sounds irredeemably old-fashioned to one's ear, that just shows how far she is removed from early nineteenth century Romantic rhetoric, and in turn, how close James still is to it. Attempts have been made to update James's Romantic vocabulary. Paul B. Armstrong, for example, has argued that James's "perspective is essentially phenomenological,"<sup>44</sup> and has given an explanation of how James relates art and morality using the vocabulary of phenomenology:

Just as James argues that the morality and truth of a novel depend at bottom on how the artist knows the world, so phenomenology finds that morality and truth in general can claim no other foundation than lived experience. . . . [According to James] even the most mimetic art is an expression of the artist's way of being-in-the-world, a reflection not of the "real" pure and simple but of the unique and individual reality created when the artist engages the world according to his temperament and position.<sup>45</sup>

This kind of vocabulary updating is necessary for the apologist who believes that the old vocabulary is unsalvageable, and Armstrong's attempt is essentially apologetic. I certainly agree with him that James, with the benefit of hindsight, can be read as an exponent of ideas carrying germs of phenomenology. But I am wondering if James really is in need of such an apology.<sup>46</sup> We certainly would not say

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43. Henry James, "The Spoils of Poynton, A London Life, The Chaperon," in *Literary Criticism*, 1138–1155, p. 1141.

44. Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. VII.

45. Armstrong, pp. 5, 51.

46. Not to mention that, like Rorty says, from a Pragmatist point of view "both analytic philosophy and phenomenology were throwbacks to a pre-Hegelian, more or less Kantian, way of thinking – attempts to preserve what I am calling 'metaphysics' by making it the study of the 'conditions of possibility' of a medium (consciousness, language)," (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 79n).

today that works of art “partake of the substance of beauty and truth,” because it would sound like an endorsement of the existence of Platonic Forms. But if we reread this quotation from James again: “the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth,” we cannot but see that the emphasis is not at all on substances that exist independently of the human mind; the emphasis is precisely on the human mind that produces a work of art. The rest of the statement, today, reads more like rhetorical flourish; but even if we read it as if it was written by the Shelley of *A Defence of Poetry*, or the Emerson of “The Poet,” still we should not fail to see how radical this Romantic vocabulary is on its way to proposing that “truth” is not something to be found “out there,” but is to be created by us, humans. When the Romantics found that through acts of imagination they were capable of re-enchancing a mechanical world of dead atoms, the result was (and still is) so spectacular that they could not but believe that they had gotten in touch with a Higher Reality. But everything they said can today be reread as saying that it is actually the re-descriptive power of imaginative language that creates truth for us, as opposed to it having an existence independent of the human mind. For the twenty-first-century Pragmatist the language of the Romantics is in no way a dead language; it is an archaic, but still clearly understandable version of her own language.

James’s idea about the potential effects of literature on the reader is also Wordsworthian. Wordsworth believed that “the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous” (*WP*, 609); James says reading an intense representation of an artist’s impression of life produces “a miraculous enlargement of experience.”<sup>47</sup> In other words James, in accord with the Romantics, still believed in the redemptive power of art for the individual reader, though not for society.<sup>48</sup> But with this we are back at “The Figure in the Carpet,” because in this reading the story is concerned not with two different understandings of the nature of meaning, but with two different ways of relating to imaginative literature.

“What I most remember of my proper process,” writes James in his Preface to “The Figure in the Carpet,” “is the lively impulse, at the root of it, to reinstate analytic

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47. James, “Alphonse Daudet,” p. 242.

48. For a transference of hope for social renovation to individual renovation in the Romantic period, see M. H. Abrams’ “English Romanticism.”

appreciation, by some ironic or fantastic stroke, so far as possible, in its virtually forfeited rights and dignities."<sup>49</sup> Rather than showing something negative then, like the ultimate uncertainty of all meaning, or the impossibility of translating literary meaning into propositions, James's objective is primarily positive: it is to show a certain way of reading literary works of art to be "the Beautiful Gate itself of enjoyment."<sup>50</sup> This way of reading is represented in the story both by the way Corvick and Gwendolen read literature, and, symbolically, by their love for each other.

For Corvick and Gwendolen "literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life" (299). Their passion for reading is absolutely enormous; James's "fantastic stroke" is really a hyperbolic metaphor: He understands deep reading – "analytic appreciation" – as a passionate love affair between the reader and the literary work of art. When the narrator tells Vereker about Corvick and Gwendolen being in love, and how they are trying to get at Vereker's "general intention" together, "Vereker seemed struck with this. 'Do you mean they're to be married?' 'I dare say that's what it will come to.' 'That may help them,' he conceded, 'but we must give them time!'" (295); and later the narrator remarks that Corvick and Gwendolen "would scarce have got so wound up . . . if they hadn't been in love: poor Vereker's inner meaning gave them endless occasion to put and to keep their young heads together" (296). Then Corvick leaves for India – he does not even have to take Vereker's books with him anymore, because by this time, just like Gwendolen, "he knows every page . . . by heart" (300) – where, as in a revelation, the figure "sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle" (300);<sup>51</sup> however, upon his return to England he refuses to share his secret with Gwendolen until they are married. Indeed, it seems, they actually put their engagement on hold in the first place because Corvick felt he needed a change of scenery in order to solve Vereker's puzzle, and then the reason he withholds his knowledge from Gwendolen after his return to England is that he knows that this will make her desperate enough to stand up to her mother, who is reluctant to give her consent to their marriage. Their love for imaginative literature – as well as their love for each other – finally consummates, the narrator is convinced, on their wedding night: "For what

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49. James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1235.

50. James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1235.

51. Harold Bloom, a critic admittedly in the Longinian-Romantic tradition, says: "Whitman demands, and rewards, preternaturally close reading, the kind that I believe is allied to possession-by-memory. You have to know his major poems intimately to render them justice, or for them to alter you, at least as a reader" ("Introduction," in *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: The Library of America, 2003]).

else but that ceremony [of revealing the figure] had the nuptials taken place?” (305). For Corvick “analytic appreciation,” quite literally, becomes “the Beautiful Gate of enjoyment.” Thus in James’s story love and its consummation in marriage are meant to be flawless symbols of passionate reading and “the apocalypse of imagination,” respectively.

What is it then that Corvick discovers? What is it that a critic is to discover? For James the work of the critic is analogous to the work of the writer, the only difference there being between the art of fiction and that of criticism is that while the former is “a direct impression of life” (*AF*, 50) – proceeding from a relationship between Author and Life – the latter is of “life at second-hand”<sup>52</sup> – proceeding from a relationship between Reader (Critic) and Work. The key term for both Author and Critic is “life.” Just as a good novel will be an intense representation of its author’s impression of life, good criticism will be an intense representation of the critic’s impression of the literary work of art, “life at second-hand”:

Any vocation has its hours of intensity that is so closely connected with life. That of the critic, in literature, is connected doubly, for he deals with life at second-hand as well as at first; that is, he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own. . . . He has to make them as vivid and as free as the novelist makes *his* puppets. . .<sup>53</sup>

This is exactly what Vereker says to the uncomprehending narrator who, the embodiment of the non-Romantic critic, tries to find out whether the secret is to do with form or content: “Well, you’ve got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling? What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life” (291). In “The Art of Fiction” James said “the only classification of the novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has not” (*AF*, 55); he found this formula applicable to criticism as well: “And it is with the kinds of criticism exactly as it is with the kinds of art – the best kind, the only kind worth speaking of, is the kind that springs from the liveliest experience.”<sup>54</sup> A work of criticism must be alive, have a life of its own; as the novelist “converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (*AF*, 52) so should the critic, having as a reader experienced an “apocalypse of imagination,” convert his experience into a revelatory reading that, as Harold Bloom put it, “will matter to others

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52. James, “The Science of Criticism,” p. 99.

53. James, “The Science of Criticism,” p. 99.

54. James, “The Science of Criticism,” pp. 98–99.

as well as to himself."<sup>55</sup> For James the novel, if it is alive, offers a vicarious experience of a life, a view on the world we could not have experienced otherwise, and the job of criticism is to produce readings that will help us live that life of the work of art – at least while we are reading. Corvick is a critic capable of producing a reading of Vereker's novels that Gwendolyn can call her "life" (307) – Corvick's reading is not *about* life:<sup>56</sup> It is life.

Our narrator, however, fails. As we have seen James said that his story is an "ironic stroke," and "The Figure in the Carpet" is indeed a textbook example of the type of structural irony where the reader is to gain an insight into the very thing the narrator fails to see by recognizing the blindness of the point of view that is being offered to him. The reason the narrator cannot see is not that he has the wrong idea of what literary meaning is, as this is not an issue either for him or for James, but that he is a bad reader. For James, as we have seen, a good reader is a passionate lover whose love affair with his beloved, the literary work of art, culminates in an apocalyptic marriage between the reader's imagination and the "life" that is offered to him in that work. Our narrator, however, lacks the passion one needs to read well. He spends only a very short period of time actually reading Vereker's novels:

Returning to town I feverishly collected them [Vereker's novels] all; I picked out each in its order and held it up to the light. This gave me a *maddening month*, in the course of which several things took place. One of these, the last, I may as well immediately mention, was that I acted on Vereker's advice: I renounced my ridiculous attempt. (292, my emphasis)

It is not long before both Vereker and his novels are "spoiled" for him, though he confesses, "I had taken to the man still more than I had ever taken to the books" (298). Having himself now completely given up the arduous work of close reading, he passively waits for Corvick to "unveil the idol" (305); when that plan is frustrated by Corvick's untimely death, he tries to get the secret out of Gwendolen – but he is flatly refused. Ironically, he comes closer to the solution than he realizes when at one point he says: "Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives – for lovers supremely united?" (306); but then he bears witness to a complete lack of awareness of what he has just said: "There might be little in it, but there was enough to make me wonder if I should have to marry Mrs. Corvick to get what I wanted (307); for lover (poet/reader) he is not, but an illegal "spy" – as Emer-

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55. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 3.

56. See James, "The Figure in the Carpet," p. 291.

son would have called him – desperate to pry into a holy communion from which he is excluded forever.

James ends his Preface to “The Figure in the Carpet” with the following words:

[T]he question that . . . comes up, the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn’t been lost. That is the situation, and “The Figure in the Carpet” exhibits a small group of well-meaning persons engaged in a test. The reader is, on the evidence, left to conclude.<sup>57</sup>

These words are not without a dark potential, for in reading “The Figure in the Carpet” we too might easily end up “as victims of unappeased desire” (313) caught up forever in a search for something that eludes us again and again; the narrator has then taken his revenge on us too: Where there should be meaning, we can only see undecidability. What James, with Emerson, would then say to us, is that “the ruin or the blank, that we see . . . is in our own eye.”<sup>58</sup>

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57. James, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 1235–1236.

58. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 47.