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"The Figure in the Carpet" as an Allegory of Reading

"The Figure in the Carpet" (1896) is one of a substantial and "homogeneous group" (James 1907-09, 1232) of tales all dealing with "the literary life" (1228), most of which were written during the last decade of the nineteenth century.[1] They were 'dramatic years' for Henry James because of the failure of his theatrical experience which exposed him to public derision.

As James himself wrote in his preface to a number of these tales included in the New York Edition, what they have in common is "their reference to the troubled artistic consciousness" (1228). Most of them were born of generalizations and are, as Edel puts it, "fables for critics" (Edel 1964, 15) - parables allegorizing the predicament of the *fin de siècle* artist and his increasing aloofness from the reality around him and from what, in "The Figure in the Carpet", James calls "the bottomless vulgarity of the age" (James 1896, 300). The protagonists of these *Künstler Novellen* are all writers and artists with their anxieties, their search for form, their yearning for perfection, their delusions, and their problems in living in a changing world which cannot appreciate their toil and their creative torment. The tales record the 'romantic' disproportion between the artist's subjectivity and the world, the impossibility of reconciling art and life, but what seems more significant is that the subject is often dealt with in the tones of comedy rather than in the tragic mood, which instead prevails in a tale like "The Middle Years" (1893).

The easiest approach to these tales is by way of the autobiographical impulse which underlies them. As a matter of

fact, they are often read as "mere fictional footnotes" (Vaid 62) to James's life, and critical discussion is generally concerned with thematic aspects relating to the artistic convictions and traits of James himself. This is a legitimate concern as the author himself declares in his preface that the tales were drawn "from the depths of the designer's own mind" (James 1907-09, 1228), from "his own intimate experience" (1229), even though he is unable to connect them with any specific 'germ' or anecdote of his life. However, what is more interesting for the critic is to investigate how the writer was able to manipulate, objectify and re-present the material drawn from his own experience, how he managed to overcome the autobiographical implications of his fables.

James — it is well-known — abhorred what he calls in the prefaces the "terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation" (1316), and he succeeded in bypassing both the autobiographical problem and the intrinsic difficulty of making fictional characters out of artists through "an orchestration of the ironic note" (Vaid 61). In the preface he clearly states that "the studies here collected have their justification in the ironic spirit" (James 1907-09, 1229) and illustrates what he means by "applied irony" or "operative irony" (1229). "It implies and projects"— he says — "the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain" (1229), which means that the irony in the 'tales of the artist' derives from the discrepancy between the aspirations of the artist and the vulgar reality surrounding him. James's interest lies in the "ironic consciousness" (1235) of the artist "left wholly alone amid a chattering unperceiving world" (1235).

In some stories irony works on more than one level. In a first-person narrative like "The Figure in the Carpet" — but also in earlier tales such as "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884) and "The Aspern Papers" (1888), which can be included in this group — the narrator himself appears as an *ironic centre of revelation,* belonging to "the great race of critics" (James 1987, 137), the band of reviewers and readers James is exposing in the tale. He is "a newspaper man" (137) who writes in "cheap journalese" (James 1896, 366), a young reviewer with limited experience and a doubtful competence as a critic. The author's irony seems to be

directed to that kind of criticism — the same that he censures in his essay "The Science of Criticism:" (1891) — which is incapable of "close and analytic appreciation" (James 1907-09, 1234) and "is apt to stand off from the intended sense of things" (1235). The reader — himself an object of irony — at the end of the tale has, as the critic Vaid puts it, to "adjust himself to the ambiguous position of the narrator so as not to accept him as an ideal critic" (Vaid 80-81) and is impelled to re-read the tale.

From the outset of the tale the reader finds himself in the world of literature. There is a novelist of great renown, Hugh Vereker; a young and hopeful critic who is also the unnamed narrator of the story; a second young and brilliant critic, George Corvick, and his intended Gwendolen Erme, herself the author of a novel; a third less young and less brilliant critic, Drayton Deane, and a work to be reviewed.

Corvick has just asked the young critic-narrator to do a review of Vereker's latest novel, which Corvick himself would have done had he not been summoned to Paris by Gwendolen.

The famous novelist dismisses the young reviewer's article as "the usual twaddle" (James 1896, 278) and in a crucial conversation with him explains that everybody misses what he calls "my little point" (280), by which he means "the particular thing I've written my book most *for"* (281). There is an idea in all of them which "stretches [...] from book to book", involves "the order, the form and the texture" and adds up to "an exquisite scheme" (282). He never dreamt of making a secret or a mystery of it, and he can't help the critic to detect it because "every page and line and letter" "gives him the clue"; "the thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume [...]. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma" (283-84). This sort of "buried treasure" (285), "something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet" (289), is the very thing for the critic, for the initiated, to find.

The narrator starts his *quest,* feverishly scrutinizes Vereker's novels in search of their 'essence', but can make nothing of all this and after "a maddening month" follows the writer's own advice

and gives up his "ridiculous attempt" (286), even suspecting that Vereker had made a fool of him. He passes over the content of his conversation with Vereker to his friend Corvick, who communicates it to Gwendolen, and the pair devote themselves to discovering the secret, continuing the 'chase' for which the narrator "had sounded the horn" (291). The advantage Corvick seems to have over the narrator is that he is in love with Gwendolen, so that "poor Vereker's inner meaning gave them endless occasion to put their young heads together" (291). The narrator imagines them as absorbed in a game of chess with the author who, meanwhile, has left England "for an indefinite absence" (293). Corvick too is sent abroad and cables Gwendolen from India saying that he has discovered the mystery, and again from Italy that he presented his solution to Vereker, who gave his assent. In an enigmatic letter to his beloved he declares, however, he will reveal the secret to her only after their marriage, not before.

Corvick and Gwendolen get married after the death of the girl's mother, but Corvick himself dies on their honeymoon. Vereker and his wife have also died in the meantime. The narrator turns to Gwendolen for enlightenment believing that Corvick passed the secret on to her after their marriage and even wonders whether he should have to marry Mrs. Corvick to get what he wanted. But Gwendolen decides to keep the secret for herself and never to "break the silence" (307).

Later Gwendolen marries Drayton Deane, a minor scribbler, and dies with her second child. As his last hope, the narrator turns to Drayton, thinking that Gwendolen may have passed the secret on to her second husband. But Drayton's answer is a confession of ignorance: he has heard nothing about any figure in Vereker's work and has no reason even to suppose that there was one.

The tale comes to an abrupt end and might go on indefinitely. It opens like an *enigma-story* immediately activating what Barthes calls the *hermeneutic code,* but the gap opened up at the beginning is not filled at the end. The secret, the treasure, the figure woven into the warp and weft of the carpet/textus is not found and the reader's expectations are disappointed. In a well-known study on James's tales, Todorov argues that the secret of his

stories is the very existence of an essential secret, "d'une cause absolue et absente" (Todorov 1978, 83) and that the story ends if the mystery is unveiled. Whether all of James's tales follow this pattern or not, in "The Figure in the Carpet" the quest does not come to an end because here the secret is not disclosed and the quest goes on in the reader's mind and in the subsequent critical debate.

Throughout the story the reader is carried along by the prospective centrifugal movement of reception and identifies himself with the first-person narrator asking "what is the figure in the carpet?"; at the end, no secret having been discovered, he is forced to change this question into another, namely, "is there a figure in the carpet?". A straightforward 'pragmatic'[3] reception does not seem to be enough and the story requires a second 'reflexive' reading which, overcoming the linear structure, discloses other perspectives and other meanings.

Questioned again in a retrospective view and against the horizon of a second reading, the text discloses other meanings and an unstable significance. The reader realizes that the answer to the implied question whether there really is a figure in the carpet is not unambiguous. The problem is amply debated in the text itself by the narrator whose attitude is subject to continual oscillation. More than once he expresses the suspicion that there may be no mystery in Vereker's work and that the writer is lying. Soon after giving up his quest, he takes the view that "the buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous *pose"* (286), and when Gwendolen refuses to make him privy to the secret discovered by her husband his immediate reaction is: "I know what to think then; it's nothing!" (307). Vereker himself employs two ambiguous images when he says that the figure in his work is like "a bait on a hook" or "a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap" (284), suggesting that it may be interpreted as a trick to lure the critic and the reader.

The other characters seem to believe in the existence of the secret. Corvick thinks that "there was evidently in the writer's inmost art something to *be* understood" (p.287). What is more, he informs Gwendolen he has found it while in India from where he

writes triumphantly: "Eureka. Immense" (296), adding that Vereker approved of it. The work, however, does not dramatize the meeting between Corvick and Vereker and the reader does not hear the writer's approval of Corvick's theory, authorizing the suspicion that the latter has found no secret and that his only aim is to force Gwendolen into marriage since he says that only after it will he disclose the mystery to her.

Other unanswered or unanswerable questions are posed by the tale in which frequent omissions of information, incomplete or doubly — directed statements, enigmatic letters, elliptic cables and a series of strange occurrences, like sudden departures and deaths, which are never accompanied by any emotion, appear like mere rhetorical and delaying devices aiming at endlessly deferring the solution of the mystery. In this way, the text continually undermines the 'dominant reading' (there is a figure in Vereker's work') it constructs through the voice of the first-person narrator, but once the reader has become aware that the narrator's mind is unperceptive and that he can no longer align himself with him, the reticence of the text, its blanks and ellipses, do not enable him to formulate an oppositional reading like 'there is no figure in the carpet'. The gap opened at the beginning of the tale is permanent, it involves not only the superficial level of the *sjuzet* but also the deep level of the *fabula* and continues to exist after the end of the story. The issue is left open and the reader finds himself with two conflicting hypotheses in his mind between which he is unable to choose because they are both equally tenable but mutually exclusive and disjunctve.

The second, reflexive reading not having enabled the reader to reverse the perspective offered by the text through the dominant reading but only to question it, he finds himself in a very uncomfortable situation, in a sort of double bind, as the story on the one hand encourages the search for the secret and on the other frustrates it. James himself seems to entrust the reader with the final responsibility for the meaning of the tale when he states in the preface that "the question that [...] comes up, the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn't been lost [...]. The reader is, on the evidence, left to conclude" (James

1907-09, 1235-36). The interrogation of the text has to go on and the reader asks now why the narrator fails in his quest.

A simple answer is that there is something wrong in his method and he lacks "close and analytic appreciation" (1234). According to Iser[4], through the first-person critic-narrator James is denouncing the traditional critical approach to literature, that sort of 'archeological' method which considers meaning as something hidden in the text which has to be unearthed like "a sort of buried treasure" (James 1896, 285), a method Vereker himself seems to encourage. But the critic who adopts this method, who believes that literature is like "a game of skill" (296), is destined to get nowhere, to find nothing but a blank space. Iser's opinion, on the contrary, is that meaning is something to be experienced and that this experience cannot be communicated, like "the new and intense experience" (297) Corvick undergoes in India where "the figure in the carpet came out" "like a tigress out of the jungle" (297).

This, too, is a legitimate interpretation which is functional to Iser's reader-oriented criticism but assumes that Corvick has really found the secret which, however, is never brought to the reader's knowledge and leaves out other questions the story poses, like the subsidiary theme of marriage and its relation to the secret, and the connection of the mystery with death.

What interests James here is not just the problem of criticism and interpretation, but the 'psychology of obsession', an issue which is central to his fiction in general and especially to his ghostly tales. The critic's mistake, or his critical 'impotence', seems to be due not merely to his lack of critical insight, but also to other causes, such as his own self-deception and the confusion he makes between the love of literature and the love for human beings; it may be the result of his nourishing hidden, repressed or inexpressible, feelings and desires in his unconscious. The narrator's obsession with the secret of Vereker's work, which James himself defines "undiscovered, not to say undiscoverable" (James 1907-09, 1234), seems to cover other obsessions and his inability to feel sensations different from those deriving from the sense of sight. "All my life had taken refuge in my eyes" (James 1896, 303), he admits, and, on the other hand, what else is a critic, Vereker

asks him, but a "coerced spectator" (303), one who searches "in his neighbour's garden?" (282-283). James ambiguously suggests in the tale as well as in the preface to it that "what we call criticism" is nothing but a subsidiary and substitutive activity, an "exercise of penetration" which "is apt to stand off from the intended sense of things (James 1907-09, 1235) and is destined to failure. As Kermode puts it, "the test undergone by the questers of his story is a test of critical potency" (Kermode 1986, 26). The celibate narrator asks himself whether the figure in the carpet was "traceable or describable only for husbands and wives - for lovers supremely united" (James 1896, 306) and whether he "should have to marry Mrs. Corvick" (306) to manage to 'penetrate' the text and see "the idol unveiled" (305).

Thus, "The Figure in the Carpet" appears to be like a *Vexierbild* - a 'picture with a secret' such as those painted by Erhard Schön - combining two different pictures in one picture, or like a sort of *anamorphosis* such as "The Ambassadors", the famous painting by Hans Holbein, where an optical subterfuge allows appearance to hide reality from the observer. Changing, however, the point of observation, the strange and obscure object which is at the feet of the two imposing characters represented in the picture is disclosed and another figure emerges from the canvas. It is a skull - the sign of nothingness.[5]

In James's work, too, the figure changes, as in an anamorphosis, according to the point of view from which the reader looks at the story. If he detaches himself from the narrator's central perspective offered by the text and takes a 'lateral' position, he perceives another figure and another possible meaning, he discovers sex and death. Now the narrator's viewpoint appears to be nothing but 'le regard qui se voit', as Lacan would put it, and the secret he is looking for is his own secret. Like an enigma-story, James's tale is based on "une dualité", as Todorov says of the detective story, and it "ne contient pas une mais deux histoires: l'histoire du crime et l'histoire de l'enquête" (Todorov 1978, 11), the crime here being the narrator's 'unpardonable sin', his emotional sterility, his refusal or inability fully to live his life. The narrator's adventure, like that of John Marcher, the protagonist of

"The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), is a great 'negative adventure', the theme of the tale the Jamesian oxymoron of the unlived life.

The obscure link uniting the art-work, the truth and death may even suggest that it is not advisable and wise for the puritanical narrator to go beyond the boundary and enquire into the mystery. As a matter of fact, the work will live only if it keeps its secret and the 'recit' can go on. "Le récit egale la vie; l'absence de récit, la mort" (41), writes Todorov. Knowledge, James seems to say in his tale, is the privilege of the dead and of the author, who chooses to die in his writing.

"The Figure in the Carpet", like most of James's *Künstler novellen,* moves in the field of theory. A competent reading of this kind of work "can only be reached - as Karlheinz Stierle states - if the act of reading is accompanied by theoretical reflection" (Stierle 1980, 87). The tale has a definite metaliterary dimension demanding a metareading, which finally discloses the story as a special case of *mise en abîme.* What the tale represents is not so much, or not only, an objective reality outside the text, but the communicative situation of literary discourse itself with its three main actants: the author-Vereker, the reader-critic and the message to be interpreted - that is, Vereker's work. This triangle mirrors the triangle of real communication formed by the author-James, the real reader and "The Figure in the Carpet" as the work to be interpreted. The two parallel communicative situations mirror each other forming a double bind which closes the tale in a self-referential and self-sufficient metadiscourse. The story duplicates itself in the inevitable interplay with the reader, and just as the critic-narrator in the story searches for the figure in Vereker's carpet, so the real reader looks for the parallel figure in James's work. The role the reader has to perform is prestructured in the text by the self-interpretative dimension of the story which supplies the receiver with a mode of reading and an attitude to adopt in order not to fall into the mistake of the narrator who in the end finds nothing but a blank space. This attitude entails the acceptance of the radical ambiguity of the tale, whose composition finally turns into its very theme.

In this elliptical and multidimensional tale, the creative act is

not merely a form of thematic representation as the tale allegorizes its own functioning and has itself *en abime.* It is about itself and about us who read and interpret it. Anticipating the antisymbolism and the sceptical epistemology of contemporary literature, it states the uselessness of looking for the 'essence', for a single unambiguous and reassuring meaning. As Butor puts it, the "repli interrogatif sur soi" of the récit marks "une réponse à un changement de l'image du monde" (Butor 18) and, in this Jamesian tale, the beginning of a tradition that considers autoreferentiality as an essential feature of fiction which "cannot be transformed any more into mere illusion" (Stierle 104).

1 Several 'literary tales' areincluded in the fifteenth and sixteenth volumes of the New York Edition of James's works. Well-known among them are: "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884), "The Lesson of the Master" (1888), "The Private Life" (1892), "Graville Fane" (1892), "The Middle Years" (1893), "The Death of the Lion" (1894), "The Coxon Fund" (1894), "The Next Tune" (1895),"The Figure in the Carpet" (1896), "John Delavoy" (1898), "The Great Good Place" (1900).

2 The possibly ironical title of James's essay "The Science of Criticism"(1891) was changed to "Criticism" when it was reprinted in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* in 1893. The subject of this short piece of writing is the condition of contemporary journalism and in particular "the great business of reviewing", a practice that, in James's opinion, "has nothing in common with the art of criticism" (James 1984, 95)

3 In his essay on "The Reading of Fictional Texts" Stierle analyses the activity of reading fictional texts comparing it with pragmatic reception - that is the reception of non-fictional texts. He writes: "Although fictional and pragmatic speech differs in status, the difference does not necessarily Influence the actual reception of ficuonal texts. There is a form of reception with regard to fictional texts that one could call quasi-pragmatic. In the quasi-pragmatic reception the boundaries of the fictional text are transcended through an illusion created by the reader himself. This illusion may be compared to pragmatic reception in an attempt to fill the gap between word and world" (Stierle 1980, 84)

4 Iser opens his essay on 'the act of reading' with an analysis of James's "The Figure In the Carpet" by way of introduction

5 James probably knew Holbein's painting, which was taken to the National Gallery In 1890. When he gave the title "The Ambassadors" to his great novel of 1901, he was perhaps influenced by Mary F.S.Hervey's book *Holbein's Ambassadors and the Men,* published in 1900, in which the identity of the two characters represented in the picture was established. James's novel, as Jean Perrot argues, is itself an anamorphosis, the story of "un changement de perspective, d'une lente anamorphose étalée sur plus de quatre cents pages que fair passer un individue du point de vue puritain utilitariste de la Nouvelle Angleterre à la vision esthétique, cosmopolite de la bohème dore des oisifs pansiens" (Perrot 1982, 266) The anamorphic vision is typical of James's fiction, in particular of a novel like *The Sacred*

Fount and of such tales as "The Lesson of the Master", "The Figure in the Carpet" and "The Turn of the Screw", where the technical problem of narrative perspective or point of view becomes an epistemological issue.

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