

## TEXTUALITY IN HENRY JAMES' *THE FIGURE IN THE CARPET*

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A tale of literary detectives, a teasing burlesque of naive criticism, a comic demonstration of the ineffability of Art, a parallel defence of the intimate mysteries of life and literature or a prime example of a literary master's inveterate habit of pulling his reader's leg? Which description succeeds in filling out the figure of *The Figure in the Carpet*? Henry James presents us with a tale of reading(s), a story which traces through the eyes of an envious, self-seeking but ultimately likeable -and anonymous- first-person narrator both a frustrated and a successful search for meaning: frustrated in the case of the narrator and the tale's "real" readers, successful (?) in the shape of fellow-critic George Corvick's quest. A meaning which originates "despite itself" in the work of the renowned novelist Hugh Vereker, which is discovered by that "demon of subtlety", George Corvick, and which finds its final resting-place, rather despairingly for the tale's more mortal readers, in the enigmatic figure of Gwendolen Erme, Corvick's wife, to whom the secret was seemingly transmitted via marriage and/or sexual intimacy. The "secret" remains a secret to the end and so our plight as readers is equated with that of the narrator-protagonist.

But do we really lose out in this testing of literary agility and perspicacity? Is it not the case, rather, that we get something out of James' tale in direct proportion to the effort we expend in, as Corvick says, "getting at" the tale? In other words, we must make it work for us rather than merely work for it. As productive readers our textual toil should reap a 'significant' harvest -though the 'harvest', in this case, may be of more than one crop. But how does one go about getting at this elusive tale by Henry James? It seems to entice us into articulating a determinate meaning, into formulating in critical terms what the ill fated Corvick vaguely phrases as "the sense of ....something or other"<sup>1</sup>; yet it incessantly postpones any final revelation of its narrative secret and leaves us with the comic figure of the baffled narrator, consoling himself ironically with the recognition that most other readers, fellow-reviewer Drayton Deane and ourselves included, are in the same boat.

1.- Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) p. 359. Further references to *The Figure in the Carpet* will be identified by page numbers referring to this edition.

This Jamesian text seems to anticipate, perhaps even allegorize, our own reading process as we struggle to produce a coherent meaning, constantly frustrated by and distanced from the narrative by means of its reversals and refusals, its unexplained gaps and silent or quickly silenced protagonists (Vereker and wife, Corvick, Gwendolen Erme -all die, willingly or not, in puzzling silence). Perhaps this is what the story is 'about'; we read about how we read or in other terms, it tells us about its own reading or writes out its own telling -as the narrator explicitly does: "I told him in a word just what I've written out here." (400) The adverbial phrase "in a word" is of importance here. As a critic, the narrator is unable to accomplish his professional, journalistic function: articulate concisely an author's 'message' or 'style', his, 'secret'. As he puts it earlier, he has failed "to name it, to phrase it, formulate it." (368) This task, "the great last word on Vereker's writings" (387), is both ridiculed and sanctioned by James through the figure of Vereker. This fundamental ambiguity towards criticism is maintained throughout the tale or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that a certain type of critic as personified in the narrator is being disparaged: the critics who make "silly" impressionistic remarks and rely on "cheap journalese". In this context, it is interesting to know that a similar adverbial phrase appears in a general definition of the critical activity: "It was in other words to trace the figure in the carpet through every convolution, to reproduce it in every tint." (387) A literal reading of the phrase serves to highlight this view of criticism as a 'reproductive' activity, a parallel text, which formulates the work's meaningful structure "in other words".

This sort of metafictional or metacritical reading, though certainly relevant in this case, would probably not account for all the text's suggestiveness and could conceivably be elicited from any literary text. This is not to say that our own 'interpretation' will not rely on this aspect of self-consciousness present in the story. Our aim shall be to incorporate such textual details as we discard an explicit search for a hidden meaning and turn to the text's productive aspect, its generation -or engendering- of meaning.

The protagonists of *The Figure in the Carpet* are both writers and readers or, more specifically, professionalized reader-writers, i.e. critics. It is in the figure of these critics that the reading/writing opposition begins to dissolve away for they write about their reading of other writings. This critical writing need not be merely parasitic upon the literary text, a copy or reproduction 'in other words'; it can also take on a creative quality of its own, a fact which Vereker himself seems to acknowledge when he distinguishes his way of revealing the 'figure' from that of the critics' (369) and which Corvick seems to enact in his almost mystic apprehension of the secret while in India. As the narrator somewhat comically puts it: "But fancy finding our goddess in the temple of Vishnu!" (381) It is in this 'writerly' context that we

shall insert the notion of textual productivity elaborated by Julia Kristeva and exposed by the later post-structuralist Barthes. Together with post-structuralist conceptions of the 'Text' and textuality, this will enable us to view *The Figure in the Carpet* not as a 'work' whose intrinsic meaning must be re-produced, but as a site for the production of meaning, a textual practice where meaning is produced and/or liberated. (This "and/or" conjunction is important, for James' tale both produces different meanings and disperses them throughout the narrative).

Roland Barthes expounds this notion of textuality in his short essay "From Work to Text"<sup>2</sup>. There he approaches the concepts of Text by listing a series of "metaphoric propositions" whose consciously open-ended articulation frustrates the terminological closure which strict definitions would afford. This in turn allows us a certain conceptual freedom in which to move as we confront the text of *The Figure in the Carpet*, a freedom in keeping with what both Barthes and Kristeva refer to as the Text's transgressive nature. This is not to say that anything goes, far from it. Our aim will be to point to those aspects of James' story which seem to prefigure this epistemological shift from 'work' to 'text': in particular, the question of figurality, the role of the author, and the reading process (as supposedly practiced by the critic-protagonists). By tracing this shift in James' story, we hope to illustrate and illuminate this Barthesian insight in situ, as it emerges and insinuates itself in the text.

Two different reading methods, never exhaustively described, are vaguely sketched out and contrasted accordingly throughout the tale: the narrator's impressionistic, 'biographical' approach and Corvick's intertextual elucidation of that "something" which Vereker's works give him "the sense of"<sup>3</sup>. One ends in utter failure, the other's results are never brought to light. Bridging these two 'readers', we find Gwendolen Erme, as eager and brash as the narrator in her initial search for the 'figure', sphinx-like in her enigmatic possession of the secret at the end. The search for determinate meaning becomes a final hoarding of the 'secret'; in both cases we must admit that a secret does effectively exist otherwise the reading process would be superfluous. Here we bring into play a reading convention whereby we

2.- In José V. Harari (ed.) *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 73-81. Also available in Roland Barthes, *IMAGE, MUSIC, TEXT*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1987), pp. 155-164, in a slightly altered form. From here onwards in this paper we shall use the capitalized term "Text" to refer to this post-structuralist conception.

3.- I use 'biographical' in a rather general sense to refer to those forms of critical analysis which posit the Author as the main sanctioning device for their interpretations. That is, I do not limit the term to those readings which attempt to 'know' the author, personally and even psychologically, via his writings.

question the reliability of a self-interested first-person narrator's account and place our confidence in other protagonists (notably Corvick and Vereker) not discredited by a revelation of their ulterior motives. The first-person perspective works both ways: it reveals indirectly and in a highly ironic light the narrator's petty self-centredness and consequent bafflement, while at the same time assuring for Henry James the general reader's acceptance of the fact that there is a secret to be discovered and that it is effectively transmitted from Vereker to Corvick. Not to admit so would be to destroy the very ambiguity which James' tale builds up and with which the figure of Gwendolen is so richly invested. The psychoanalytical consequences of this masculine-feminine alternation in the transmission of the 'secret' are beyond the scope of this paper, but we should keep in mind the repeated allusions to the sexual sphere, especially the influence of marriage on Corvick's critical enterprise where sexual initiation would seem to be indistinct from the literary initiation which the celibate narrator so conspicuously lacks<sup>4</sup>.

The narrator's interest in reviewing Vereker's latest novel is at first purely self-seeking. It is an opportunity to be "clever" and "make a few pence". As he himself puts it, whatever his review should do for Vereker's reputation, "I was clear on the spot as to what it should do for mine." (357) This mercantile approach soon runs into difficulties when he applies to Vereker himself in order to get the information required, the 'correct' reading, straight from the horse's mouth. The author appears as "void of angles" (359) as his work; the complete rout of the 'biographical' approach to fiction, what W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley criticised as the "intentional fallacy"<sup>5</sup>, is insinuated right from the start. This is not to deny completely the narrator's critical acumen, a capacity attested to by the same Vereker, the story's main means of sanctioning readings and providing a guideline, ambiguous though it may be, for the reader<sup>6</sup>. But it is also Vereker who foresees the narrator's eventual failure and despair and warns him accordingly.

4.- Vereker rather chauvinistically retorts to the narrator's confession that Gwendolen knows of the existence of the secret: "For all the good it will do to her -or do me! A woman will never find out!" (372) though he then concedes that marriage may help them in their quest. The narrator himself refers to the connection between love and literature: "They would scarce have got so wound up, I think, if they hadn't been in love: poor Vereker's inner meaning gave them endless occasion to put and keep their young heads together." (375)

5.- vid. "The Intentional Fallacy" in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 3-18.

6.- Henry James himself was conscious of the need for this authoritarian figure: "Two little things, in relation to (*The Figure...*), occur to me. One is the importance of my (i.e., the narrator's; in his Notebooks James tends to identify himself with the narrators) being sure the disclosure has been made to the wife (Gwendolen) by her 1st husband (Corvick). The other is the importance of his having been sure he had got hold of the right thing. The only way for this would be to have made him submit his idea to the Author himself. To this end

All this textual information, these reading strategies deployed by the various protagonists, can be subsumed within the framework of the abovementioned Barthesian distinction. For the narrator, Vereker's novel is a 'work', not a Text. He approaches it as an object of consumption, a literary construct which points to something else behind and beyond it. This something else may be the 'real' world, as in the case of a realist-naturalist reading, an 'inner' meaning hidden behind a 'figure', or the 'man' behind the book, the author's personality. In other words the "figure in the carpet" must be the figure 'of' or 'for' something, unresolved figurality cannot be sustained or even tolerated within this conception of the literary text. Figurality, however, never gives way to that 'something else' which supposedly underlies the narrative; the work constantly becomes Text. As Barthes puts it:

While the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language: it exists only as discourse.(...) in other words, the Text is *experienced only in an activity, a production*.<sup>7</sup>

The narrator fails to dominate this discourse, he signally fails to produce any meaning at all while trying to re-produce that 'inner' meaning which escapes him. The "ardent young seeker for truth" (365) is unable to uncover the 'truth' behind the figure. This failure is underlined by what, for the narrator, is the severest blow, the loss of the man, of the human figure of Vereker:

Not only had I lost the books, but I had lost the man himself: they and their author had been alike spoiled for me. I knew too which was the loss I most regretted. I had taken to the man still more than I had ever taken to the books.  
(378)

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the Author's death would have not to precede his 'discovery'. Say I make him get at the Author, with his 'discovery', and the latter's death occurs, away from London, therefore, between that event and my ascertainment of the intended marriage. The form in which I hear of it from the girl is that her fiancé HAS submitted it to the Author. Then the Author dies -abroad, ill, in a climate- It's there my young man has gone to him -is with him." In F. O. Matthiessen & Kenneth B. Murdock (eds.), *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York: O.U.P. 1961), p. 223.

7.- Harari (ed.), op. cit., p. 75. Barthes also provides a striking visualization of this distinction: "...the work is concrete, occupying a portion of book-space (in a library, for example); the Text, on the other hand, is a methodological field." p. 74. In this light, it is interesting to note that the library at Bridges does not contain one volume of Vereker's works. Apart from James' allusion to the upper class glitteringly empty, dandyish patronage of literary celebrities (which the sort of criticism the narrator indulges in helps to create), this detail points to a conspicuous absence in his story: that of Vereker's books themselves, the bone of contention. Not one quote, no hint of their subject matter or stylistic achievements, is communicated to the reader.

Construing this as an avowal of a clearly biographical approach to fiction, we can detect here a sense of its failings when confronted with the plurality of the modern Text. The contrast with Corvick's 'textual' approach is dramatically presented in the tale though, as always in Henry James, the distinction is far from clear-cut but shrouded in ambiguity. Barthes says of this distinction:

The Text (if only because of its frequent "unreadability") decants the work from its consumption and gathers it up as play, task, production, and activity. This means that the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to lessen) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but linking the two together in a single signifying process.<sup>8</sup>

Reading and writing become difficult to distinguish in a tale whose main protagonists are literary critics. As we have already pointed out, the writings are indeed their readings. The paradox lies in the fact that that which is read -the 'figure'- is absent to us, the story's readers, in a way which correlates with the narrator's experience. Yet even here, the narrator's reading experience is what is effectively conveyed to us in his writing. His narrative is quite explicit on this point:

Pen in hand, this way, I live the time over, and it brings back the oddest sense of my having been, both for months and in spite of myself, a kind of coerced spectator.(388)

The narrator would thus seem to approach that "single signifying process" of which Barthes speaks. That he remains trapped in his own "obtuseness" is a sign that he does not fully realize this possibility (similarly, he does not achieve social or sexual maturity through an intimate human relationship)<sup>9</sup>. His reading aims to go beyond the written text to get at the 'figure', the hidden signified at the core of the literary (and sexual) experience. The Text's field, however, is that of the signifier:

The Text ... practices: the infinite deferral of the signified: the Text is *dilatory*; its field is that of the signifier. (...) the signifier's *infinitude* does not refer back to some idea of the ineffable (of an unnameable signified) but to the idea of *play*<sup>10</sup>.

8.- Harari (ed.), op. cit., p. 79.

9.- The narrator speculates on the possibility of marrying Gwendolen but veers away from it: "Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives -for lovers supremely united?... 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. Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge? Ah that way madness lay" (391)

10.- Harari (ed.), op. cit., p. 76.

Though we shall return to this play of signifiers when we come to the question of figurality, it is interesting to note that the notion of 'play' reinvited by Barthes and Kristeva is also embraced by Corvick in radical opposition to the narrative. Despite initial temptations to question Vereker, the "supreme authority", directly, Corvick soon devotes himself entirely to his solitary quest for meaning: he concedes that too much information "would spoil the fun of seeing what would come". (371)

This concept of play (visually presented in the chess-match metaphor in section V) is far from inane frivolity however. Foreboding hunting imagery is dispersed throughout the narrative, as are allusions to the trap-like quality of the figure itself. Corvick and Vereker revel in this hunt, both aware of the dangers with which it is fraught and of the glory of success. Literature is indeed as dangerous as life for a select few. The narrator, struck with Corvick's utter devotion, says: "He'd call it letters, he'd call it life, but it was all one thing." (374) Further on, Corvick replies to the narrator's queries:

...That he had no wish to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice. He quite agreed with our friend both as to the delight and to the honour of the chase -he would bring down the animal with his own rifle. (377)

This almost frenzied endeavour proves to be a source of discord in his relationship with Gwendolen, apparently because she would at first follow the narrator's inclination to turn to Vereker (377). A literary dispute here very literally disrupts life, a matrimonial engagement in this case, though, once again, the details are vague and contradictory. Once the secret is 'discovered', however, it is marriage that will seal its transmission from Corvick to Gwendolen and account for Gwendolen's rapid literary development from the passivity of a "coerced spectator", a state she especially shares with the narrator in Corvick's absence, to that of a priestess initiated in the secrets of literature/life. As in the narrator's description of the couple's critical activity, 'play' is a very serious affair indeed:

For the few persons, at any rate, abnormal or not, with whom my anecdote is concerned, literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life. (380)

But, in more explicit terms, what is Corvick's reading method? Does it really differ from the narrator's. After all, the hidden signified is revealed to him apparently, he does seem to trace the figure's contour. Does the tale then finally reconcile an infinite play of meaning with a general unifying principle, be it thematic, structural, stylistic or whatever? We would answer both affirmatively and negatively, stressing the fact that it is here, at this crossing-point, that James' tale rehearses uncertainly and hesitatingly the

passage from 'work' to 'Text'. Henry James' literary origins in the nineteenth-century Realist tradition would firmly situate his productions within a canon of literary 'works' and yet the modernist tendencies of many of his tales and his later 'psychological' novels would seem to run against the grain of his naive realism, providing a 'textual' counterpoint which flowers here and there in his writings. We must not equate 'Text', however, with a defined, concrete literary artefact, a novel or a poem. As both Barthes and Kristeva highlight, the Text is an activity, a certain type of discursive practice, transgressive of genre distinctions and boundaries. It is a certain mode of reading/writing, "un certain type de production signifiante"<sup>11</sup>, a semiotic practice both within and of the signifier which can appear in numerous writings and discourses. *The Figure in the Carpet*, in its final indeterminacy, can be seen as allegorizing in part this shift towards textuality. Without breaking with the realist mode, it nevertheless strains it by not fulfilling its main demand: the possibility of being satisfactorily interpreted, however liberally, in relation to extratextual factors -i.e., social milieu, historical context, biography, etc.

Unfortunately for this brand of realism, the 'figure' remains radically textual for the Text is radically linguistic<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, the elucidation of the 'figure' can only be carried out as another textual production which, theoretically, could be elucidated in turn by another text and so on:

If he has hold of something that can't be got into a letter he hasn't hold of the thing. Vereker's own statement to me was exactly that the "figure" would fit into a letter. (382)

In this light, Corvick's reading method seems to approach the pole of intertextuality. The authorial authority, Vereker, is shunned from the start -the fact that the 'figure' does exist is not suggested to Corvick by Vereker as it is to the first-person narrator, the latter's divulcation of his conversation with

11.- Kristeva speaks of the "Text" as a "translinguistic apparatus (appareil) which redistributes the linguistic order by bringing into relation a communicative word aiming at direct information with different types of anterior or synchronic enunciation. The text is thus a 'productivity', i.e., 1. its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive); consequently it can be analysed by means of logical categories rather than purely linguistic ones; 2. it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: within the space of a text various enunciations, taken from other texts, intersect and counteract with each other." Julia Kristeva, *Semiotike: Recherches Pour Une Semanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 113. All translations are mine.

12.- Kristeva, op. cit., p. 279: "Produced in language, the text is only conceivable as linguistic material and, as such, it relies on a theory of signification." Kristeva calls this theory "semanalysis" and defines it as the study of the sign not as structure but as productive activity, and the critical study of signifying systems and their laws as they appear and are transformed in texts and discourses.



Vereker merely confirms Corvick's prior intuition. The texts of Vereker's opus are sifted through patiently and a-chronologically in marked contrast to the narrator's impulsive reading: Returning to town I feverishly collected them all; I picked out each in its order and held it up to the light.(370)

The "light" turns out to be rather dim, for this orderly, linear sequence produces nothing whereas Corvick's combinatorial procedure, playing page against page in the hope that the textual network will appear, does bear its uncertain fruits. The physical object, the 'work', can even be dispensed with. Gwendolen describes the process:

He didn't take a book with him -on purpose; indeed he wouldn't have needed to- he knows every page, as I do, by heart. They all worked in him together, and some day somewhere, when he wasn't thinking, they fell, in all their superb intricacy, into the one right combination. The figure in the carpet came out...(381)

The esoteric aura which surrounds this discovery (it occurs in India) reveals one of those hesitancies, one of those in articulation, which pave the way for the story's indeterminacy. Intertextuality is not only one character's dramatized reading method, it is also a process affecting texts in general and overtly alluded to in this Jamesian text in particular. In section VI, the resonances of three of James' tales, *The Real Thing*, *The Beast in the Jungle* (posterior to *The Figure*) and *The Figure in the Carpet* itself<sup>13</sup> are quite remarkable yet totally to be expected if one conceives of the present story as, to quote J. Hillis Miller, an "explicit allegorical narrative" of the procedure of fiction in general<sup>14</sup>.

The notion of intertextuality, understood in its widest sense, has long been present in literary criticism since the academicist study of 'influences'.

13.- Henry James, op. cit., p. 381: " 'But how does he know?' 'Know it's the real thing? Oh, I'm sure that when you see it you do know...' '...it's the real thing itself, let severely alone for six months, that has simply sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle. ...the figure in the carpet came out...' ". Curiously enough, in keeping with Gwendolen's ambiguous role and with the tale's suffused sexuality, the figure has been feminized, the 'tiger' has become a 'tigress'.

14.- J. Hillis Miller, "The Figure in the Carpet", *Poetics Today*, Vol. 1:3 (1980), does not refer to intertextuality itself but to a self-deconstructing lack of referentiality present in all fiction. He refers to this figuratively as catachresis: "Catachresis is the name for that procedure whereby James uses all the realistic detail of his procedure as a novelist to name in figure, by a violent, forced, and abusive transfer, something else for which there is no literal name and therefore, within the convention of referentiality which the story as a realistic novel accepts, no existence. This something else is figure, design, the embroidered flower itself." (111) My analysis of James' story is indebted to Hillis Miller's "deconstructive" reading, though his defence of fiction's essential "unreadability" is at odds with the transgressive and transformative powers which Kristeva and Barthes attribute to the "Text". Cf. note 22 for a critique of his conclusions.

Post-structuralist theories limit this notion, on the one hand, when they enclose it within the boundaries of the purely textual and, on the other hand, open it up impractically by considering virtually everything as 'text'. Within this context, it becomes practically impossible to pinpoint the intertextual elements within a given text. Barthes refers to the whole text as an "intertext":

Every text, being itself the intertext of another text, belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text's origins: to search for the "sources of" and "influence upon" a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation. The quotations from which a text is constructed are anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without question marks<sup>15</sup>.

The relevance of this affirmation as an analytical tool is debatable but as a critical attitude it is of undoubted ideological importance. Henry James' tale discloses an awareness of this, coupled with a richly suggestive refusal to explicitly espouse the concept of Text, fixed in a willed silence after Corvick's death, is an apt symbolisation of this literal/literary dilemma. Her refusal to reveal the 'secret' is also a refusal to submit to determinate meaning, to the authority of the work's closure. It is altogether fitting that it should be a woman who preserves the freedom of the Text. Vereker's masculine authority is at once inherited and revoked by a woman<sup>16</sup>. The sanctioning authority of Vereker is thus doubly undermined: by Gwendolen and by the narrative itself which ends up by 'killing him off' and disseminating his contradictory indications on the nature of the 'figure'. Authority and figurality are seen to be intimately related.

A curious transmission of authority takes place in *The Figure in the Carpet*, a transfer of literary and social power which accompanies possession of the 'secret'. Hugh Vereker, George Corvick, Gwendolen Erme, all in turn wield an authority whose premises are never fully explicated as befits any self-respecting power-structure. Hugh Vereker himself indicates the arbitrary, purely contingent nature of the secret: "If my great affair's a secret, that's only because it's a secret in spite of itself -the amazing event has made it one." (367) In other words, the secret is that there 'is' a secret, a tautological argument which would perfectly fit authority's reason for being. The narrator remains permanently outside or under the auspices of authority: he contemplates the secret as a "coerced spectator", unable to obtain a dominant position via a reading of the figure (any 'coherent' reading would also be the 'correct' one). And yet who is the 'originating' author behind all this? Hugh

15.- Harari (ed.), op. cit., p. 77

16.- For an interesting discussion of James' use of female characters see John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (London: Methuen, 1985).

Vereker as Henry James' objective correlative? This option would force us to search for a sanctioning authorial figure outside the text with the subsequent danger of falling into pure biographical criticism. Within the concept of Text with which we are working, however, the 'author' remains firmly entrenched 'in' the text and must be explained as a textual function. An extra-textual Author as unmediated source of meaning is to be viewed not as a natural guarantor of truth but as an ideological imposition<sup>17</sup>. On this point Barthes is quite explicit in ways which seem to stem from a direct reading of James' story:

The Text can be read without its father's guarantee: the restitution of the intertext paradoxically abolishes the concept of filiation. It is not that the author cannot "come back" into the Text, into his text; however, he can only do so as a "guest", so to speak. If the author is a novelist, he inscribes himself in his text as one of his characters, as another figure sewn into the rug; his signature is no longer privileged and paternal, the locus of genuine truth, but rather, ludic. He becomes a "paper author": his life is no longer the origin of his fables, but a fable that runs concurrently with his work. There is a reversal, and it is the work which affects the life, not the life which affects the work<sup>18</sup>.

Vereker would seem to play this role to perfection. Once the narrative exigencies have been fulfilled (i.e., surreptitious transmission of the secret), Vereker conveniently dies so as to avoid an uncomfortable dispersal of authority. Corvick follows suit once Gwendolen has been enlightened. Furthermore, Vereker concientiously assumes a ludic role with his baiting and bantering of the obtuse narrator and his exhilaration at Corvick's attempted tracing of the figure. Textual 'play' is highly evident throughout the narrative and no more so than during the narrator's first interview at Bridges where Vereker literally becomes his own figure in the carpet in the unwitting eyes of the narrator: "I can see him there still, on my rug, in the firelight..." (364). Here we find dramatically enacted another of the multiple figures for the "figure in the carpet": prosopopoeia as a trope for another trope, that of the 'figure in the carpet'.

The author becomes a figure (in less ironical light, biographical criticism uses its own 'figure' to redress the proliferation of meaning). Authority adopts a figurative representation and in so doing risks being subjected to the play of differences which figurality entails. This is what occurs in James' tale: the 'figure in the carpet', knowledge of which endows one with power, remains radically indeterminate and thus subtly undermines

17.- Vid. Michel Foucault, *What Is An Author*, in Harari (ed.), op. cit., pp. 141-160, for a full discussion of this point.

18.- Harari (ed.), op. cit., pp. 78-79.

all claims to textual authority. Its ineffability works to preserve its domain and hegemony, yet at the same time, the figure's various guises, its multiple figurations, function as a destabilizing factor. Constant contradiction accompanies the recurrent attempts to define the 'figure', so much so that interpretation gives way to "an explosion, a dissemination"<sup>19</sup>. Adopting metaphorically Kristeva's terms, we could say that the "geno-text", the substratum of infinite linguistic possibilities, invades and disrupts the "pheno-text", the actual text where meaning has been delimited<sup>20</sup>. Such plurisignificance naturally obstructs any authoritative interpretation while at the same time, in James' text at least, luring the reader on towards it.

Figures for the 'figure' abound. It is Vereker himself standing on a rug (364) or, in more lyrical terms, it is the sublime "passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely" (365). It may be a stylistic "trick", represented in "the order, the form, the texture" of his books and which is "the thing for the critic to find" (366). At other times, this "little trick" becomes an "exquisite scheme" (366) and even synecdochically, his whole work (367). The figure both "governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma" (368) and generates all of Vereker's work as its central "organ of life" (368), an image which once more points up a sexual undertone. Then again, it may be rather expansively termed a "general intention" or, picturesquely, "buried treasure" (369). More concretely, it is also a structural principle, either "a complex figure in a Persian carpet" or "the very string ...that my pearls are strung on" (374). Perhaps it is only a "monstrous pose"! (370) Little wonder that after this barrage we remain both as baffled as the narrator and intrigued by these 'non-definitions'. Their effect is repetitive, forcing us to check and discard them throughout the narrative, supply possible interpretations and readings to counterpoise their figurative weight, as well as productive, generating meanings that are never ratified but stratified pell-mell and left to an

19.- Harari (ed.), op. cit., p. 76

20.- Kristeva, op. cit., p. 283, describes the geno-text as that "plurality of signifiers in which -not outside of which- the actually formulated signifier (that of the pheno-text) is located and, as such, over-determined." Further on, she adds: "To the pheno-text's 'surface' the geno-text adds *volume*. To the pheno-text's *communicative* function the geno-text opposes the *production of meaning*." p. 284

Jonathan Culler, in his *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), comments revealingly, for our reading of James' tale, on this concept: "But it follows, as direct corollary of its definition, that 'geno-text' is an empty concept, an absence at the centre. One cannot use it to any purpose since one can never know what it contains, and its effect is to prevent one from ever rejecting any proposal about the verbal structure of a text. Every combination or relation is already present in the geno-text and hence a possible source of meaning. There is no standpoint from which a proposal could be rejected." (p. 247.) The authorial standpoints in *The Figure in the Carpet* either vanish physically or undermine themselves through their teasing, mysterious silence.

incessant process, despairing for some, of dissemination. In other words, the 'figure' is that absent centre around which *The Figure in the Carpet* is constructed, 'absent' in the sense that it is never defined or 'present-ed' in the tale, yet is the very reason for the text's existence as text<sup>21</sup>. Paradoxically, in generating the text it generates itself, which leads us to see in this process a pseudo-allegorization, within a nineteenth-century Realist framework, of the way 'textuality' works. It frustrates the readability of a literary work, understood as a totalizing quest for determinate, meaning, by presenting it with contradictory or incompatible meanings, with a sense of "unreadability"<sup>22</sup>. Let us recall here that after suggesting that the intimacy of marriage has something to do with insight into the 'figure', the tale frustrates the solution that this ultimately inarticulable sexual experience seems to provide by not allowing any literary offspring -i.e., the revelation of the secret in a critical article- to result from the union between Gwendolen and Drayton Deane. (Curiously enough, Gwendolen does literally give birth to two children and her novelistic career picks up after marriage -life and literature seem to complement themselves.)

This central absence around which the tale evolves is projected by its very title and reflected in the "names of absent and unattainable texts"<sup>23</sup> dispersed throughout the narrative. The allegoric-symbolic reading which the title seems to propose is subverted by unresolved figurality. The title does not refer to a concrete entity but to a 'figure' with apparently no referential correlate (i.e., it is a 'catachretic' title as are *The Real Thing* and *The Beast in the Jungle* to differing degrees, catachresis being in Hillis Miller's words "the rhetorical name for the flower no flower which poisons the anthology of tropes, the odd man out"<sup>24</sup> -it names in figure that which has no literal name, no referential existence). In much the same way, the tale incorporates other texts to comic purpose, of which the only evidence we have is their titles. Thus we have the literary journal "*The Middle*" which figuratively

21.- Vid. J. Carlos Rowe, op. cit., p. 11: "The 'artistic object' for James is that which establishes a center of interest, ..., but whose very center is nothing but the selective and transgressive interpretations that "surround" it, that determine the artistic object as central."

22.- J. Hillis Miller, art. cit., p. 113: "Unreadability is the generation by the text itself of a desire for the possession of the logos, while at the same time the text itself frustrates this desire, in a torsion of undecidability which is intrinsic to language. The text itself leads the reader to believe that he ought to be able to say what it means, while at the same time making that saying impossible." Note, however, that Hillis Miller's reivindication of fiction's "unreadability", as compared to Kristeva's "textual productivity", has a certain clousural force, for this unreadability is inherent to language -a highly debatable claim- and so can merely be 'reproduced' by the reader. The productive and transformative power of the Text is, in this view, not liberated by indeterminacy but tyrannically dominated by it.

23.- J. Hillis Miller, art. cit., p. 116

24.- Ibid., p. 111.7

"bloomed... in the stiff garden of periodicals" (360), along with Gwendolen's novels and Vereker's last work. References to these fictional works provide an ironic counterpoint to the interpretative process undertaken by the protagonists and readers alike. Gwendolen's first novel is entitled "*Deep Down*", which spatially metaphoricizes the figure's inaccessibility, while her second, produced after she has acquired knowledge of the secret, bears the ambiguous title "*Overmastered*". Finally, we come upon Vereker's "*The Right of Way*" which the tale opens out to us. We might say that the undefined interpretative process which these titles seem to bear witness to is at odds with the dissemination of meaning which actually takes place as we confront the only text which is presented to us, that of James' *The Figure in the Carpet*.

This 'actual' text, like those absent texts it alludes to, thus begs the question posed by its very title. In this way, the work opens out into Text. 'Play of differences', 'irreducible plurality', 'dissemination of meanings', 'endless productivity', all of these admittedly modish and faintly metaphorical expressions are terminological coinings, borrowed more or less validity from different methodical fields, which strive to describe this transition adumbrated in James' tale. The historical context in which this "epistemological shift" occurred/is occurring constitutes an object of enquiry touched upon by contemporary criticism, sometimes more aware of the changing status of its own critical 'episteme' or methodological model than the altered and altering conditions of literary production. Rather than analyse these methodological and diacritical concerns, we have limited ourselves to the 'textuality', in its restricted sense, of James' tale, and enclosed ourselves within its "literary circle". In metafictional terms, we have concurred with the narrator's own appreciation of his fictive status:

I have sufficiently intimated that it was only in such circles we were all constructed to revolve... (396)

The fact that Henry James composed this tale in a literary climate of "cheap journalese" and scant critical acclaim is also sufficient intimation that a text's textuality responds to wordly factors as well. The indeterminacy and teasing parody of James' text is one of the responses available and it is here that the work/Text distinction appears as an illuminating insight, an insight which in turn can open out to those all-encompassing 'texts' of History and Society. But this lies outside the 'literary circle' of this paper.