

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English

Band: 1 (1984)

Artikel: Is Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet" 'unreadable'?

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99827>

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Is Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet" 'Unreadable'?

Peter Halter

1

One of the concepts that plays an important role in contemporary criticism is that of plurisignificance. Critics grapple with such problems as a text's inherent openness, in the sense that it elicits closures in the act of reading but defies a definitive one; or they are concerned with ambiguity, that is with the specific way in which the limited openness of a text invites, so to speak, two or more different but equally valid interpretations. The latter notion finds its most radical form in the conviction that each literary text contains *fundamental ambiguities*, or aporias. The critic discovers, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, "the presence in a text of two or more incompatible or contradictory meanings which imply one another or are intertwined with one another, but which may by no means be felt or named as a unified totality."¹ Aporias are therefore radical ambiguities which we can no more integrate on the level of a higher synthesis in the course of a dialectical process of interpretation. To discover them entails abandoning the idea of the organic unity of a work of art. According to this theory a text becomes "unreadable" when approached with the traditional notion that, in spite of its complexity, it consists of parts that can all be integrated into a unified whole.

James's "The Figure in the Carpet" is one of the texts that has elicited a number of interesting interpretations in the last few years, all of which are based, in one way or another, on this concept that a text is inherently open and bound to contain ambiguities or even downright aporias.²

¹ J. Hillis Miller, "The Figure in the Carpet", *Poetics Today* 1:3 (Spring 1980), p. 113. Further references to this essay will be identified by page numbers in this text.

² Besides J. Hillis Miller's article, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London and Henley 1978), pp. 3-10; J.-B. Pontalis, "Le lecteur et son auteur: A propos de deux récits de Henry James", in *Après Freud* (Paris 1968), pp. 337-355; Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity - the Example of James* (Chicago and London 1977); Tsvetan Todorov, "The Structural Analysis of Literature: The Tales of Henry James", in David Robey, ed., *Structuralism: an Introduction* (Oxford 1973), pp. 73-103.

This is by no means accidental, since the story foregrounds in an intriguing way the very open-endedness of the process of interpretation. It tells of a young, ambitious critic, who is given the chance of reviewing the latest novel of a famous writer, Hugh Vereker. Shortly afterwards our critic, who is the nameless first person narrator of the story, meets the novelist at a weekend invitation. To his dismay he overhears that Vereker has read the article and calls it "the usual twaddle". When the novelist realizes that the young critic has happened to hear what he said, he tries to make up for it by attempting to unravel the deeper implication of his remark in a long nocturnal conversation:

"[T]here's an idea in my work [says the novelist to the critic] without which I wouldn't have given a straw for the whole job. [...] It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it. So it's naturally the thing for the critic to look for."³

The essence of his novels, as Vereker describes it, is something that is *hidden* and hence for the critic "to look for", to "find", to dis-cover. "The thing", says the novelist elsewhere, is "as concrete there as a bird in a cage, ... a piece of cheese *in* a mouse-trap. It's stuck *into* every volume as your foot is stuck *into* your shoe" (283-84; my italics). Our critic therefore tries to come nearer to this essence by a kind of kernel-and-husk approach: "I see – it's some idea about life, some sort of philosophy", he ventures. Vereker rejects this, since he repeatedly tries to make clear that this "general intention", though hidden, is something that cannot be extracted and separated from the rest but is present *everywhere*: "It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma", he says (284). Thus the essence is at one and the same time something *behind* or *in* in the work and something that is identical with, and inseparable from, the *whole* text, since "the order, the form, the texture" of his books might, as Vereker says, someday "constitute ... a complete representation of it."

The nearest the narrator comes to gaining Vereker's approval is when he asks whether the general intention could be regarded as "a sort of buried treasure" (285), or, as he calls it later, "something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet." Vereker, he says, "highly approved

³ "The Figure in the Carpet", in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, Vol. 9 (London 1964), ed. by Leon Edel, pp. 281-82. Further references to "The Figure in the Carpet" will be identified by page numbers in this text.

of this image when I used it, and he used another himself. 'It's the very string', he said, 'that my pearls are strung on'" (289).

Again, these images are contradictory insofar as they contain the paradox of something that is absent and yet present, hidden and yet apparent everywhere, a figure all there on the surface and yet concealed as the string on which the pearls are strung. Placing such attempts at defining the essence of a fictional work into the larger context of Western metaphysics, J. Hillis Miller sees them as a typical manifestation of "logocentrism":

The structure in question ... is the basic metaphysical one of the *logos*, of God, for example, as the creative word who is present in all his creations as their ground, as the signature written everywhere in the creation, but who is always present in veiled form, since he can manifest himself, by definition, only in disguised, delegated, or represented appearances (114).

Things become even more complicated when one includes the fact, as Miller does, that all of these figures for the essence of Vereker's works are glyphs or hieroglyphs that not only "restate the traditional metaphysical paradox of the creative logos" but also "its always present subversive anaglyph, the 'idea' that there is no idea, the idea that the figure behind the surface is a phantasm ... Neither of these ideas is possible without the other. Each generates the other in a regular rhythm of unreadability, figure and ground reversing constantly" (114).

For Miller, this structure is repeated throughout the whole story, above all in the chain of interpersonal relations and the characters' destinies, which narrator and reader constantly try to elucidate and relate to a meaningful pattern that would finally reveal the figure in the carpet. The story becomes "a journey of penetration, crossing barriers, reaching depths, but ... one is never finally in the arcanum" (116).

From a more limited point of view, Shlomith Rimmon comes to a similar conclusion. She classifies "The Figure in the Carpet" as a narrative with a central enigma or gap in the *fabula* that remains to be filled, like in a detective story. But while in the detective story the end reveals the correct solution, no such disambiguation is possible in James's story. For Rimmon the basic gap remains open and the text fundamentally ambiguous, since it yields "mutually exclusive 'finalized' hypotheses."⁴ Either there is a figure and the narrator fails to recognize it, or then there

⁴ Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity – the Example of James*, p. 95. Further references to this book will be identified by page numbers in this text.

isn't, either because the novelist and all the characters in the story are deluded, or because the novelist has pulled the critic's leg and the latter is correct in his recurrent suspicion that "the buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous pose" (286).

Does an attempt at interpreting the story have to stop here? The contradictory clues about the basic riddle belong, as Shlomit Rimmon has pointed out, to what Roland Barthes called "the hermeneutic code", and within this code the interpretation of our text is indeed "severely restricted", since "all potential hypotheses [are] logically classifiable either under a or \bar{a} " (57), the former meaning there *is* a figure in the carpet, and the latter saying there isn't. But Rimmon herself points out that "even when the hermeneutic code predominates, the narrative may activate other systems of reading ... , thus calling for multiple coding and opening the ... closedness of the hermeneutic code" (57). She believes, however, that in this story the multiple coding does "only *somewhat*" alleviate its basic ambiguity, since "all the [other] codes depend on the basic hermeneutic polarity. Without finding out what is happening," she says, "it is hardly possible to offer any coherent interpretation – be it cultural, symbolic, or other" (57).

But is the text really inconclusive, even on the level of its *fabula*? The fact that the *quest* for the figure in the carpet ends in confusion does not mean that the *fabula* itself is confusing or contradictory to the point where we do "not find out what is happening."

"The whole story", says Rimmon, "is an [inconclusive] attempt to fill in the missing information about its basic enigma" (95). An attempt by whom? By us, its readers? If so, then only indirectly so. First of all, the story consists of the *narrator's* attempts to fill in the missing information. All is filtered through a central consciousness, so that the reader's access to the riddle is from the very beginning only a mediated one. Once more we find ourselves in one of those Jamesian narratives in which we have to rely, for better or worse, on that "magnificent and masterly indirectness"⁵ James was so fond of. In "The Figure in the Carpet" this indirectness is a natural outcome of the plot itself, since the narrator, realizing that a direct access to the riddle is barred, tries to solve it by means of the novelist and of his friends – only to move deeper and deeper into a maze that does not solve the problem but

⁵ Letter to Mrs. Humphry Ward (July 1899), quoted from Edith Warton, "The Man of Letters", in Henry James, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Leon Edel (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 34.

compounds it, since the narrator is as much mystified by the people and the events as by Vereker's novels themselves. Hence, in one sense, the movement of the story seems to be backward, not forward, since the characters who are apparently in the possession of the "hidden treasure" die one after the other, leaving the narrator further and further away from the center, and adding new enigmas to the original one.

It seems clear, however, that any reading of the story that is exclusively concerned with the basic narrative ambiguity of the existence or non-existence of the figure in the carpet falls short of mapping out the no less intriguing problems of the interpersonal relations and their connection to the central quest. Let us try therefore to move a little deeper into James's maze.

2

When we compare the narrator's attempts to understand his friends with his attempts to grasp the essence of Vereker's novels we are struck by the fact that the problems involved seem to be very much the same in both cases. Many of the words and phrases the young critic uses when he tries to solve the riddle of the novels could recur, or *do* in fact recur, in connection with his efforts to understand Vereker, Corvick, Gwen-dolen, and Drayton Deane. Musing about the actions and reactions of his friends, he cannot but "infer" (294), "draw a sharp conclusion" (295), or then he is left, as he says, with an "inference", or has to "gather" something from a remark (295). Key words such as "sense", "feel", "see" appear in both contexts. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that the passages in which the critic tries to understand his friends are studded with phrases that contain the surface-depth opposition which is so prominent in the conversations with Vereker and Corvick about the figure in the carpet. There are dozens of phrases and sentences like the following ones, all of which contain the contrast of what is hidden or underneath to what is there as part of a visible, audible, tangible outward reality:

Deep down, as Miss Erne would have said, I was uneasy, I was expectant. At the core of my personal confusion ... was the sharpness of a sense that Corvick would at last probably come out somewhere (292; italics are mine in this and the following quotations).

We had *found out* at last how clever [Vereker] was, and he had to make the best for 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 ... (276).

“Oh, you’re so *deep!*” she drove home./“As *deep* as the ocean! All I pretend is, the author *doesn’t see*—” (278).

I am afraid that what was *uppermost in* my mind during several anxious weeks was the *sense* that if we had only been in Paris we might have run over to see Corvick (302).

The many variations of this basic polarity can be subdivided into such oppositions as light versus darkness, the overt versus the covert, the explicit versus the implicit, the evident versus the not so evident. All this shows that, ultimately, there is no difference between interpreting a text and interpreting another human being. In both cases we have a number of data – signs – which one has to decipher. In both cases there is, as we have seen, a tension between the data themselves, what is given, visible, and their interpretation, the inference of what is invisible and felt to exist, of what is there and yet not there, present and yet absent. With a text as well as with a human being, seeing entails reading, deciphering, interpreting.

In this series of deferrals James’s central consciousness remains, as he says, “a coerced spectator” (303), unable to arrive at a consistent reading of Vereker’s novels and equally unable to decipher what happens with and in the persons around him. Are we, the readers, better off than he is? Can’t we transcend the narrator’s subjectivity, at least to a certain degree, and, for example, make more of the tale by juxtaposing the various characters? We soon note that there are major differences in the way they cope with the central riddle.

Let us look, for example, at the difference between the narrator on the one hand and Corvick and his close ally Gwendolen on the other. From the very beginning of the story James contrasts the limited mind of the narrator with the more generous and comprehensive response by Corvick. The narrator is keen to review Vereker’s latest novel for mainly egotistical reasons – “whatever much or little [the review] should do for [the novelist’s] reputation I was clear on the spot as to what it should do for mine”, he says (273). In an initial conversation with Corvick he calls Vereker “awfully clever”, a remark that provokes his friend to retort: “Well, what’s that but awfully silly? What on earth does ‘awfully clever’ mean?” (274). Thus the first conversation sets up a contrast between the two men that is in many ways confirmed in the course of the story. “Clever” remains a key word for the narrator; his self-esteem as well as his estimation of others rests predominantly on qualities of the mind: on intelligence, cleverness, ingenuity. Therefore his own failure

totally exasperates him; it proves either that he is too stupid to discover the secret, or so obtuse as not to realize he is being had.

For Corvick, on the other hand, the game itself – and, consequently, its rewards – are of a different sort. For him, too, the battle of the clever minds of the author and his readers is part of the game, but in addition to that there is the beauty of the fictional world that holds an inexplicable fascination. This world opens up dimensions for Corvick that the narrator seems oddly barred from – dimensions of the emotional and the aesthetic that go far beyond the cerebral hermeneutical game proper.

The deeper involvement of Corvick and Gwendolen has its rewards long before Corvick is convinced that he has solved the central enigma itself. The frustrated narrator concedes that he

felt humiliated at seeing [them] derive a daily joy from an experiment which had brought me only chagrin. [...] They did as I had done, only more deliberately and sociably – they went over their author from the beginning. There was no hurry, Corvick said – the future was before them and the fascination could only grow. [...] I doubt whether they would have got so wound up if they had not been in love: poor Vereker's secret gave them endless occasions to put their young heads together [291].

The fact that the two are in love not only adds to the fascination the riddle holds for them, but it actually seems to increase their chances of solving it. It is Vereker himself who points this out. Hearing of Corvick's and Gwendolen's close personal ties he explicitly asks whether they are going to be married and then says: "That may help them, ... but we must give them time" (289).

Does this imply that the capacity to fall in love and/or the sexual act opens up new possibilities in a realm of knowing that transcends the purely cerebral, a realm from which the narrator, who is a bachelor, is barred? Throughout the story, *knowledge of the meaning of Vereker's novels* and *knowledge of sex* are related to each other. Can we say that in the case of Corvick and Gwendolen the meaning of "to know" as "to have insight" links up with the old biblical sense of "to have sexual intercourse"? By the time the two apparently know the hidden essence of Vereker's carpet, they also "know" each other sexually.

But the mystery comprises more than the sexual act, it comprises a complicated pattern in which the relations of the characters to the text cannot be separated from the relations they have with one another, that is, from the way they attract or repel each other, are enchanted and disenchanted with one another.

Thus Corvick and Gwendolen are described as a happy couple during their joint quest for the “hidden treasure”; but when the time comes when even *their* patience is severely taxed, their love is suddenly overshadowed too. In a conversation with the puzzled narrator, Corvick even denies that he is engaged to Gwendolen (295). Is Gwendolen suddenly disenchanted because Corvick is unable to solve the riddle? Does she, does he himself unconsciously connect his impotence as reader with his impotence as human being? One thing at least becomes clear: the ups and downs they have as readers are connected to the ups and downs in their personal relationship. This becomes especially evident when Corvick’s second telegram from Rapallo announces that Vereker confirmed that he, Corvick, has indeed discovered the figure in the carpet, and that he will reveal the secret to Gwendolen as soon as they are married. Gwendolen does not seem surprised at all about this odd proposal but says serenely: “It’s tantamount to saying – isn’t it – that I must marry him straight off?” (300). Even the fact that her mother has objected so far to her getting married to Corvick is suddenly treated as utterly unimportant.

There is no doubt that Gwendolen’s love for Corvick is directly related to her belief that Corvick is capable of knowing what everybody else is barred from. According to Lacan, this will not surprise us once we understand that love is based on the Knowledge located in the Other. What one desires is *le sujet supposé savoir*: “Celui à qui je suppose le savoir, je l’aime.”⁶ Thus Corvick is so desirable for Gwendolen because she believes that he *knows* and will initiate her into the same Knowledge. Here the double sense of “to know” is indeed appropriate; initiation by marriage entails a union of mind and body by means of which one tries to overcome the *béance*, the gap between oneself and the other/Other, the gap that opens up as soon as one becomes conscious of one’s own identity as a *separate* self.⁷ By the sexual act one

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XX: Encore, 1972–1973* (Paris 1975), p. 64.

⁷ For an explanation of Lacan’s complex – even polysemic – use of the concept of “the Other” see Malcolm Bowie, “Jacques Lacan”, in *Structuralism and Since*, ed. by John Sturrock (Oxford 1979), pp. 116–153, esp. pp. 134–137, and Anthony Wilden, “Lacan and the Discourse of the Other”, in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self* (New York 1968), pp. 157–311, esp. pp. 263–270.

tries to bridge the gap and get hold of the Knowledge one assumes to exist in the Other, a Knowledge from which one is essentially barred.⁸

In James's story the subject of the initiation, the figure in the carpet, is of course itself a figure, a concretisation of a comprehensive, fundamental Knowledge that comprises all, and thus stops the incessant drifting of the signifier in a world in which everything has its identity not in itself but is named by its difference to every other thing within a system of distinctive oppositions. Hence, seeing the figure in the carpet, perceiving and naming the essence, entails, ultimately, a God-like Knowledge of the design that includes everything, down to the minutest particular, since it "governs every line", "chooses every word", "dots every i", and "places every comma" (284). A reference to that God-like Knowledge that Gwendolen projects unconsciously onto Corvick is contained in the telegram she sends him (as an answer to his own telegram announcing his discovery): "Angel, write!" (298).

The narrator's own relationship to the people around him, the way in which he is torn between sympathy and antipathy, affection and revulsion, shows a similar pattern to the relationship between Corvick and Gwendolen. In the narrator, too, desire is clearly linked to the Knowledge he assumes to exist in the Other, and his hope to attain it. Thus he likes Vereker very much as long as he hopes that the novelist will help him to discover the figure in the carpet; as soon as Vereker leaves him hung up, affection turns into antipathy, and the dark suspicion that there may be no figure – and hence no Knowledge to be attained at all – leaves him doubly disenchanted: "Not only had I lost the books, but I had lost the man himself", he finally has to admit, "they and their author had been alike spoiled for me" (294).

⁸ "If the unconscious has taught us anything," Lacan writes, "then it is above all this: that somewhere, in the Other, 'it knows' [quelque part, dans l'Autre, ça sait]. [...] The very status of Knowledge implies that it exists beforehand, and is to be found in the Other, waiting to be grasped, *apprehended* [...] il y en a déjà, du savoir, et dans l'Autre, et qu'il est à prendre. C'est pourquoi il est fait d'*apprendre*]. (*Le séminaire, livre xx: Encore*, p. 81, 88–89; my translation. I have tried to find an equivalent for Lacan's puns, by means of which he wants to point out that language itself – through its metaphors and catachreses – defines the subject's attitude to the Knowledge assumed to exist in the Other as inherently aggressive. This aggression plays an important part in a number of Jamesian texts. The best analysis of this dimension is to be found in Shoshana Felman's fascinating interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* in *Yale French Studies* 55–56 (1977), pp. 94–207).

The opposite movement can be seen in his attitude to Gwendolen. He finds her more interesting in proportion to her chances of gaining access to the secret, a long and gradual change of attitude that culminates in that strange moment some months after Corvick's death when he asks himself whether he would have to marry her to be initiated himself into the secret, since she herself had apparently been initiated only after marrying Corvick:

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 – so I said to myself at least in bewildered hours (306).

Nevertheless, his hope of getting hold of the secret and his affection continue to enhance each other, and his last desperate attempt to get her to talk is, although by no means a marriage proposal, from beginning to end a scene that could almost entirely be read as the wooing of an unsuccessful suitor:

The hour ... finally arrived. One evening when I had been sitting with her longer than usual I laid my hand firmly on her arm.

“Now, at last, what *is* it?”

She had been expecting me; she was ready. She gave a long, slow, soundless headshake, merciful only in being inarticulate. This mercy didn't prevent its hurling at me the largest, finest, coldest “Never!” I had yet, in the course of a life that had known denials, had to take full in the face (307).

The fact that Gwendolen refuses to tell the secret has variously been interpreted as a lack of magnanimity, or as an indirect confirmation of the suspicion that she has nothing to tell – be it because there is no secret (or no *discovered* secret) at all, or be it because she was *not* initiated by Corvick.

But, continuing with the assumption that Corvick *did* achieve a break-through of sorts and did tell her about it, her refusal to yield the secret is understandable enough when we consider that, here and elsewhere, the attempt to get hold of the truth is inherently aggressive. In the scene just quoted Gwendolen is not only wooed, as it were, but also cornered, and it recalls the frequent metaphors of attacking, hunting and trapping that appear throughout the story in the context of the quest. All reading, Corvick's no less than the others', is also an act of aggression, and James's story can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with this. On this level, the text contains its own paradoxes: the devoted

reader, James implies, is also a particularly aggressive reader, and the reader an author needs most is also the reader he fears most.

“The Figure in the Carpet” ends with a last futile attempt by the narrator to get hold of the secret. This time it is Drayton Deane, the second husband of Gwendolen, the critic’s last “ghost of a chance”, whom he approaches about a year after Gwendolen’s death. More than ever before he feels he made a fool of himself when he finally comes to the conclusion that Drayton Deane has not the faintest idea what he is talking about. At the end the narrator does indeed cut a poor figure for various reasons, not the least of which lies in his assumption that Drayton Deane, since he was married to Gwendolen, *must* know, must, so to speak, have been initiated automatically.

3

We have seen that throughout the story there is a basic opposition between the luckless narrator and the other main characters around him: while his concepts, ideas and doings lead him deeper and deeper into the maze, all the others engage in the quest seem at least to have “come out somewhere” (292). The clearest contrast here is the one between the narrator and Corvick. Is Corvick the hero of the story, as his name could imply, the *victor* of the tale because he has a head and a heart (*cors*), who has penetrated to the heart of the matter, the ideal reader who is a match to the ideal author? On the phonetic level, one could interpret Hugh Vereker’s name (hju: ’verekə) as an interlacing or a superposition of the *Eureka* Corvick cables from India after his discovery and the Latin *veritas* or the English *verity*, which had come to mean “truthfulness” by the middle of the nineteenth century before it fell out of use. (One could point out, to take this little game a bit further, that *veritas/verity* is half visible and half hidden, there and yet not there.) The displacement of *Eureka* from Corvick to Vereker could be interpreted as an ingenious linking of author and reader/critic as the two ends without which the literary work is virtually nonexistent, or does not come to fruition.

But, assuming that Corvick is something like the ideal or prototypal reader, what do we make of the fatal accident that kills him on his honeymoon? And what about Gwendolen’s equally untimely death? According to J. Hillis Miller one interpretation – among others that contradict it – would be that “the possession of the secret is deadly – like looking on the goddess naked” (116). Another interpretation could regard the story as a kind of black comedy, in which James leaves his

narrator at the end “shut up in his obsession forever” (310), with all those dead who apparently possessed the secret, and with him as sole survivor who recalls, in a rare moment of contrition, the strange “manner in which, for the good of his soul doubtless, fate sometimes deals with a man’s avidity” (302).⁹

But again, *does* Corvick solve the enigma? Could we say that the real moment of truth is the one in which he has to *name* the secret he has discovered? Is this the moment when it dawns on Corvick that his book, envisioned as “the great last word on Vereker’s writings”, “this exhaustive study, the only one that would have . . . existed, was to turn on the new light” (302–303), will never be written? Because there is no such thing as “the great last word”, however profound the insight that preceded it? One need not go as far as J.-B. Pontalis, who suggests that Corvick’s death might be a passive suicide, but the fact that Corvick takes his young bride for that fatal ride in a horsecart although “he had no command of that business” (304) suggests that he overestimated his potency and paid for his hubris.

Tsvetan Todorov defines the essence of James’s tales as “the quest for an absolute and absent cause” (79). The formula is somewhat misleading if we define (as Shlomith Rimmon does) the absent cause too narrowly as the one basic link that, if one were to find it, would bring about a coherence otherwise absent. We have seen that the quest for the figure in the carpet is itself a figure for a much more basic concern: a quest for Knowledge that haunts the Jamesian world as it haunts us, since it is an essential aspect of the *condition humaine*. It pervades the text in all its ramifications. Thus Todorov himself realized that James’s indirect vision, the point of view in the tales, is an integral part of this

⁹ The basic quest of the narrator, which does not contain any progress and hence leads him on to place his hope again and again on someone else, contains a metonymic displacement which exactly corresponds to Lacan’s view of metonymy as “signifier of desire”. Metonymy is for Lacan – in Maria Ruegg’s words – the “desire for the Other, which in Hegelian terms is at once a desire to possess – to own, to appropriate, to ‘subject’ – the other, a desire to be recognized by the other, and a desire to replace, to substitute oneself for the other. But the Other can never be ‘replaced’ or ‘possessed’ by the desiring subject, for it symbolizes precisely that which is always beyond, that which exceeds the accomplishment of any particular desire. If one desire always leads to another, in an infinite self-perpetuating ‘metonymic’ chain, it’s because there can be no ‘real’ satisfaction of desire, for there is no Object that can put an end to desire itself” (Maria Ruegg, “Metaphor and Metonymy: The Logic of Structuralist Rhetoric”, *Glyph* 6 (Baltimore and London 1979), pp. 150–151).

quest for Knowledge: “The fact that he (James) never gives a clear and full representation of the objects of perception . . . is nothing but a translation into another form of the general theme of the tales: the quest for an absolute and absent cause” (79).

It is important to add here that for the later James these enigmas are not willfully created but inevitable – ultimately, there *is* nothing but appearances whose interpretations remain doubtful. The quest for understanding a literary text is therefore basically the same as the attempt to understand the people one is surrounded by, and even our feelings of affection and aversion, love and hate, are inextricably tied to the absent Knowledge that haunts us and that we assume to exist in the Other. According to Lacan – and James’s text fully supports this view – coveting someone means coveting *le sujet supposé savoir*, in order to regain a wholeness that should, ideally, bridge that gap which eternally separates us from the otherness around us, from all that we are barred from, from the unconscious, from the Lacanian realm of the Symbolic. The gap will never be closed; the quest goes on, is in fact unending.¹⁰ James’s tale paradigmatically enacts this perennial act of decipherment, with the reader in the footsteps of the characters. Is such a text “unreadable”? Yes, if we regard the successful act of interpretation as a stopping of the incessant drifting of the signifier and try to write, or at least to move towards, “the great last word” that will make all others superfluous. On the other hand such a text continues to be eminently readable once we understand that it is about the act of reading itself, and that this is an act that will never end and that, moreover, comprises much more than we usually dream of. James shows us that we are constantly engaged in reading, deciphering, interpreting – when we read a text, when we love, or go about our daily business. It all hangs together. Or, as the narrator once says about Corvick, musing about “[his] colleague’s power to excite himself over a question of art”: “He called it letters, he called it life – it was all one thing” (290).

¹⁰ Or then, one could say: it ends in death only. For this quest for wholeness or “One”, expressing the subject’s profoundest desire, is really a desire for *zero*, since it is the desire for *non-difference* that originates in the discovery of difference.

Eros, in other words, is also Thanatos. Is this also part of James’s carpet, and does this explain the strange interlacing of the quest for the figure with love and death? Is Corvick’s death, which puts an end to his quest, also a fulfillment of the quest? “It is this desire for what is really annihilation,” writes Anthony Wilden, “that makes human beings human . . .” (“Lacan and the Discourse of the Other”, p. 191).