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The Thematics of Interpretation: James's Artist Tales

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James's literary stature has never been as easy a matter to determine as that of Tolstoy or Balzac, and discussions of his fiction inevitably focus on the connection between aesthetics and morality. Some critics have judged his writing to be overly refined and precious and his subjects to be indifferent to the major concerns of man. For them James is an aesthete, and his works are doomed to be minor. For others, James is a moralist, taking a firm stand against aestheticism in his novels and exploring complex human issues without the didacticism of his predecessors. Indeed, response to James's work becomes a kind of cultural barometer.[1]

This controversy about James's reputation and how it reflects our sensibilities is sharply evident in a significant critical reversal by Philip Rahv. In 1943 he wrote, "This tension between the impulse to plunge into 'experience' and the impulse to renounce it is the chief source of the internal yet astonishingly abundant Jamesian emotion" ("Attitudes to Henry James" 223). He added that his contradictions constitute his greatness. In an article in 1972, however, Rahv denied that James is a major writer on an international scale, and he said that many readers are "put off by the tension in him between the impulse to consent to experience and the impulse to withdraw from it" ("The Henry James Cult" 20). His renunciations, he decided, are "cerebrally calculated and too contrived to carry conviction," while he lapses into "obsessive refinement, a veritable delirium of refinement." What has happened? Writing during the height of the Vietnam War, Rahv concluded that James was hopelessly dated, that his views about Old World corruption and New World innocence made Rahv cringe. "This idea strikes us today as preposterous—a transient historical fantasy generated by an exaggerated sense of national security and a buoyant self-interpretive grandiosity from which at this late date one recoils with bewilderment." What is bewildering is that Rahv, writing at a time when America was discovering the evil within, could read James so literally, could condemn James for ever having thought America innocent. In the aftermath of that painful discovery for America, we can look at James afresh and realize that he conveyed in his novels what it has taken America, at least according to Rahv, a long time to discover: namely, that frequently acting means inflicting pain, that involvement entails corruption, that evil is not partisan, but the product of history, from the personal to the global scale.[2]

That James's commitment to form and to the theme of art was not contrary to moral concerns was best expressed by R. P. Blackmur in 1943: "James made of the theme of the artist a focus for the ultimate theme of human integrity, how it is conceived, how it is destroyed, and how, ideally, it may be regained" (191). Indeed, Lionel Trilling claimed that James's "imagination of disaster" was what "cut James off from his contemporaries and it is what recommends him to us now" (57). Echoing Blackmur, he concludes: "James even goes so far as to imply that the man of art may be close to the secret center of things when the man of action is quite apart from it" (76).

James's emphasis on art, then, would not make him an "aesthete," but a writer engaged in the central problem of man. The difficulty critics encounter in trying to determine where James stands occurs because the controversy about him is the very stuff of the novels. James continually sets up, or has his characters set up, seemingly ideal forms of life or of love, only later to undercut those ideals or to demonstrate their danger. Yet he does not allow for an escape from establishing the patterns. In a James novel, man, by possessing an imagination, is fated to use it, to fantasize and to act upon those fantasies, to fight chaos with order and then to fall victim to that very order. Beneath much of James's fiction runs the dictum of Freud—that great

civilizations are achieved at great psychic cost to man. In the Jamesian universe, man has no access to experience without imagination, but with it life is always elusive. What emerges from what some have called James's convoluted sentences, artificial plots, and contrived renunciations is a shadow play that anticipates the ongoing drama of Jamesian criticism.[3] At what point, James forces us to ask, does the imagination become inimical to the force of life?

Most recently structuralist theories of literature, with their emphasis on the world as invention or as text that we must learn to decode, have had the effect of placing James, with his emphasis on the centrality of the imagination, once more on center stage. If we live in a world of signs about experience of life itself, as Roland Barthes has said, then the dilemma of the artist or the struggles of the critic, two of James's favorite themes, are appropriate metaphors for living in the social world where interpretation is inevitable. With their seasoned authors, novice writers, baffled critics, and moral dilemmas, the artist tales offer art and interpretation as analogues for all human experience.

One of the first tales to deal with the theme of art was "The Author of Beltraffio," published in the English Illustrated Magazine in 1884. It is a sinister story in which the opposition between a well-known author's commitment to art and his wife's moralistic disapproval of his work results in the victimization and death of their son.[4] An early unsigned review calls the tale "painful" and "repulsive" and judges James for his decadent subject matter, while ignoring his treatment of the subject. The decadence in this tale to which the reviewer objected can be traced to the narrator, who begins as an observer and ends as an accomplice. A devout admirer of the author of "Beltraffio," the narrator is an American infatuated with European aestheticism, and his perceptions, not James's, are responsible for the reviewer's warning to the author "not to patch his tunic with the cast-off purple patches of a fast-decaying French school, however great the temptation" (Gard 154). But James had cast his own barbs at the French school earlier in his critiques of Maupassant, Flaubert, and others. In this story, the narrator's devotion to Mark Ambient stems from his evaluation of "Beltraffio," which he calls "the most complete presentation that had yet been made of the gospel of art; it was a kind of aesthetic war-cry" (AB 73). Moreover, the narrator exhibits many characteristics of the recent convert, most notably his exaggerated zeal, his desire to proselytize, and a lingering timidity about total commitment. The latter is most apparent in his recoiling away from Gwendolyn Ambient, who appears the perfect embodiment of aestheticism in the narrator's eyes. Referring to "Beltraffio," the narrator recalls: "Nothing has been done in that line from the point of view of art for art. That served me as a fond formula, I may mention, when I was twenty-five; how much it still serves I won't take upon myself to say—especially as the discerning reader will be able to judge for himself" (AB 4). That an American with a cultural tradition of self-conscious innocence based on rejection of Old World artifice should feel allegiance to a movement that, at its extreme, subordinates life to art permits James to undermine an important cultural generalization.[5]

What "the discerning reader will be able to judge for himself" is the price this narrator paid for his "fond formula" of art for art's sake. In this tale, the manner in which this American reports his episode with the European author emphasizes how completely the former had been conquered by the cause of aestheticism. He cannot perceive a natural scene without first placing it artistically. Ambient's garden becomes for him the place "where certain old brown walls were muffled in creepers that appeared to me to have been copies from a masterpiece of one of the Pre-Raphaelites. That was the way many things struck me at that time, in England—as reproductions of something that existed primarily in art or literature. It was not the picture, the poem, the fictive page, that seemed to me a copy; these things were the originals, and the life of happy and

distinguished people was fashioned in their image" (AB 8). Even the cottage had "a general aspect of being painted in water-colors and inhabited by people whose lives should go in chapters and volumes" (AB 9). Although he has termed Ambient one of the major proponents of militant aestheticism, he antagonizes his host with his exclamations, particularly when he compliments the little boy by comparing him to a painting: "He's like some perfect little work of art." Ambient responds by grasping his arm: "Oh don't call him that, or you'll—you'll! . . . You'll make his little future very difficult" (AB 22).

How little the narrator is aware of his own rigid mode of perceiving is evident when he refers to "the little game of new sensations that I was playing with my ingenuous mind" (AB 3). His mind, however, is anything but ingenuous. In fact, his preconceived notions about reality color everything he sees. For example, Ambient conforms to the narrator's vision of how an artist should look. "There was a brush of Bohemian in his fineness; you would easily have guessed his belonging to the artist guild" (AB 7).

As Ambient is for him the prototype of the Bohemian artist, the author's sister Gwendolyn is the walking embodiment of Durer's melancholia, "so perfect an image of a type . . . that while she rose before me I was almost as much startled as if I had seen a ghost" (AB 24). Yet, despite his reverence for aestheticism, he considers Miss Ambient "a singular fatuous artificial creature" (AB 24). While she originally fires his imagination by appearing to him as "a restless romantic disappointed spinster, consumed with the love of Michael-Angelesque attitudes and mystical robes" (AB 24), in retrospect he is willing to acknowledge that perhaps "she hadn't in her nature those depths of unutterable thoughts which . . . seemed to look out from her eyes." He frequently doesn't see through her mask, because she conforms to his very conventional notion of the unconventional.

Predictably, as soon as he glimpses Mark's wife Beatrice, dressed wholly in white and seated in the garden with the child in her arms, he translates her into a delicate, aristocratic Gainsborough heroine. Desirous of a formal symmetry that life rarely yields, he transforms Gwendolyn Ambient into the diametrical opposite of her sister-in-law. Her faded velvet robes, black coiffure, and dramatic gestures fulfill the narrator's aesthetic need for a counterpart to the white scarves, smooth hair, and calm repose of Ambient's wife.

But when the narrator tries to force this aesthetic polarity into the realm of character judgment he stumbles. His tidy categories work no longer. If he reveres Ambient for including an aesthetic war cry in his works, why feel so unsympathetic toward Gwendolyn Ambient, who appears, at least in the narrator's paradigm, to be another devoted advocate of art for art's sake? If Beatrice Ambient is indeed a model of morality and purity, why try to convert her, as he does persistently, to a movement that would only render her more like her sister-in-law? The moral categories that the narrator established to parallel his aesthetic ones begin to dissolve midway through the story. It is Gwendolyn, after all, who admits that despite her intense sensitivity to form, sometimes she must draw back, for "one must be good, at any rate, must not one?" It is Gwendolyn, "the fatuous artificial creature," who insists on calling the doctor for her nephew Dolcino, while it is Beatrice, with her "moral dread of things as they are," who dismisses the doctor for fear of contaminating her son by her husband's art, although the child is dying.

What the narrator implies but never articulates is that the paradigm that equates aestheticism with a total subordination of life to form, and moralism with a reverence for life over art, cannot hold. It is Beatrice, at the end, who sacrifices life to preserve form—that of the perfect innocence of childhood. Beatrice prefers her son's death to his corruption by anything in life. Beatrice seeks perfection, but her distrust of art misguides her into seeking it in life. As a result, her displaced aesthetic drive corrupts far more than we imagine

Ambient's books can. Moreover, by choosing to have her child die rather than expose him to her husband's art, Beatrice demonstrates a much greater faith in the power of art than either her husband or Gwendolyn claims for it.

But before the narrator witnesses the complete dissolution of his terms, he feels compelled to convert Beatrice Ambient to art. Although his ostensible motive is to promote domestic happiness between his host and hostess, we sense that he is motivated by guilt. As an American, at least as that nationality is portrayed in the Jamesian world, he would have inherited a tradition profoundly skeptical of any artifice and irreverent to form. Lured into the aesthetic movement, he probably would have retained some notion of a dichotomy between an allegiance to art and one to morality. Indeed, this is exactly what James must have felt since he was accused by many American critics of being an aesthete, while he consciously rejected any affiliation with groups he labeled as such himself. Matthiessen may be right when he says that some of the atmosphere of unreality in this story comes from James's attempting "to dramatize the aesthetic gospel of the eighties without quite indicating, perhaps without being quite sure at this stage of his development, exactly how much of it he escaped himself" (2).

Perhaps not totally convinced of his dedication to art, the narrator became sufficiently prey to his tenacious early views to see Gwendolyn as evil and to see Beatrice as threatening, as a reproach for his recent infatuation with art. He is affected by Beatrice's "incorruptible conformity" and "her tapering monosyllabic correctness. . . . She might have been . . . the very angel of the pink of propriety" (AB 48). To convert Beatrice would be to discredit her moral superiority, to win her over to his side, and to include her in the devil's party now that he had become a member—"She thought me . . . a depraved, young man whom a perverse Providence had dropped upon their quiet lawn to flatter his (her husband's) worst tendencies" (AB 55). His deeper motive is disguised by his moral imperialism, whereby he convinces himself that beneath her frigid exterior there lives a woman potentially responsive to art, if only he initiates her. It is the rationale of every seducer whose assault is ameliorated on the grounds of being "for her own good." When Beatrice Ambient takes his advice and decides to read some of her husband's manuscript, "I congratulated her cordially and ventured to make of my triumph, as I presumed to call it, a subject of pleasantry. But she was perfectly grave and turned away from me . . . " (AB 62).

By the end we have a dead child, two grief-stricken parents whose deaths soon follow, a woman retired to a convent to atone for her sins, and a narrator still protesting that his motives were to promote domestic bliss. In fact, his tone is slightly ruffled as he tells the reader "to judge of my compunction for my effort to convert my cold hostess" (AB 73). And when he relates that Beatrice Ambient read not only the last book that her husband wrote but also dipped into "Beltraffio" right before she died, he has the air of a man slyly admitting a triumph that he is still too ashamed to openly claim for himself.

James is just as ambivalent and noncommital about his attitude toward art in a story written four years after "The Author of Beltraffio," "The Lesson of the Master." We find the central consciousness to be once again an aspiring young writer, Paul Overt, whose reverence for an older literary figure profoundly affects his life. Yet in some way "The Lesson of the Master" reverses the earlier tale, for the successful older artist enjoys continued domestic happiness at the expense of the younger man, rather than the younger man's seeking to justify his commitment to art at the expense of the older man's family.

At first we are struck by the similarity of the pattern. St. George, an established literary figure, has burnt one of his books at the request of his wife, who considers it "bad." But the incident contrasts sharply with that of the previous tale. First, St. George appears to have complied with his wife's demand without ill-feelings;

second, we are not sure if his wife's intention in branding the book "bad" was that it was evil or that it was badly composed. Overt acts as reverently towards St. George as the young writer did toward Mark Ambient; he also harbors preconceptions about the "artist" that his first encounter with St. George dispels. Of even greater significance, Overt's expectations are undermined not only by his master's image as an artist, but also by his behavior.

In his encounter with the well-known author he expects to discuss "literary" problems and to share artistic secrets; instead, in the case of both these artist fables, the novice becomes involved in the master's life so deeply that the relationship yields a painful lesson in life rather than a "professional" lesson in art. In each case the aspiring writer approaches his mentor with fixed ideas about the opposition of the realms of art and life, and in each case his encounter challenges that opposition as he undergoes an initiation into the complexities of creation.

Like the other writer in "The Author of Beltraffio," Paul Overt perceives aesthetically, translating everything into form. Even in his ruminations about Marian Fancourt, the woman he loves, he concentrates more on "representing" her than on knowing her. In order to conform to his stereotype of the alienated artist, Overt is ready for sacrifice; indeed, he expects it. He appears more prepared for life to be a disappointment than for it to proffer any happiness. His exaggerated worship of the elder artist and his association of art with sacrifice and suffering make him prone to take any advice from his mentor uncritically, in particular a confidence that necessitates renunciation. And St. George, entertaining a similar theory about the pain and alienation necessary to achieve art, is likely to give just such advice.

Once we are convinced that Paul is predisposed to submitting wholly to St. George's advice, we can examine the latter's words not as they struck the young man but as they strike us in the context of the entire story. What exactly are St. George's pronouncements? First of all, he claims that marriage, with its responsibilities to wife and children, imperils the artist. "Well, all I say is that one's children interfere with perfection. One's wife interferes. Marriage interferes" (LM 70). St. George never says that the artist should not marry, but rather that "He does so at his peril." Insisting that the artist cannot do without sacrifices, St. George states the following paradox: "I've made no sacrifices. I've had everything. In other words I've missed everything" (LM 72). St. George is convinced that any gains in life must entail losses in art. In warning Overt about the loss necessitated by conventional family life, St. George confesses, "If your idea's to do nothing better there's no reason you shouldn't have as many good things as I—as many human and material appendages, as many sons or daughters, a wife with as many gowns, a house with as many servants, a stable with as many horses, a heart with as many aches" (LM 73). The implication here is that the renunciation of the wife, children and house would incur other aches as well. The artist, striving for a totality of life that seems impossible, is fated to yearn and to translate his inevitable longings into art. In any case, the unself-conscious immersion in the pleasures of life can never be the luxury of the man with artistic aspirations.

Incredulous at what he calls an "arraignment of art" that has reduced the artist to a "disenfranchised monk," Overt balks at the prospect of becoming a celibate without the salvation of the church. "Ah, you don't imagine by chance that I'm defending art?" St. George replies. "Happy the societies in which it hasn't made an appearance, for from the moment it comes they have a consuming ache, they have an incurable corruption, in their breast. Most assuredly is the artist in a false position! But I thought we were taking him for granted" (LM 77).

In this version of "the fall," the happy society has no need for art; the fallen world has art alone as a means of attaining salvation. But, as the rest of the tale reveals, James knew that art alone was not enough

and that it could not easily be distinguished from experience. This fall into art finds a critical echo in Jacques Derrida's argument that we wrongly assume primacy of oral communication over written language in our intense desire to establish a "real world" unmediated and undisturbed. In this tale, in "The Author of Beltraffio," and in others of his artist stories, James demonstrates that the primacy of the concept of life as opposed to art is questionable, as is the primacy of moral choice to the creation of form. Such oppositions are undermined by James's artist tales, through the intertwining of moral and aesthetic concerns. The "fall" into art, the subject of "The Lesson of the Master," has its origin in the most pressing question in nineteenth-century intellectual life—what can replace religion? Can art be a workable substitute? To fulfill this function, it needed the trappings of the religion it replaced. It needed priests or other mediators, sacrifice, restraint, celibacy, and rigorous discipline. St. George echoes some of this when he says that the artist "has nothing to do with the relative—he has only to do with the absolute" (LM 76). Making direct contact with the absolute, the divine, is possible through art as it was through Christianity, by renunciation of the earthly. In fact, art wants to look more and more like the Christianity it replaced. But it must remain a secular salvation, only partially successful, because it is an illusion about the power of illusion.

That art, in a self-conscious and imposing guise, is glorified by a society only reflects that same society's insecurity, its lack of an absolute that can unify it into one total vision. The "consuming ache" in that society is in its constant need for meaning, which can come only from the self-conscious structuring of individuals, not from the shared pattern of a whole people. The only shared pattern here is the humanist's desire to believe in the magic of the individual product of the imagination. That is what St. George believes, but he has acted in a manner that he interprets as self-indulgent and as falling below the standards of those who are "the elect," the artists. His advice to Overt to renounce life is sincere; in relation to the absolute, St. George feels that he has lost through his own weakness. He does not see his advice as self-serving even though it results in his marrying the young writer's beloved. Living at a point in history where the self-conscious ascetic artist seems holy, St. George cannot resist encouraging his young admirer to pursue that life to its extreme even though he chose not to. St. George, like other characters in James's works, satisfies his curiosity through the lives of others. "Let me see before I die the thing I most want, the thing I yearn for: a life in which the passion—ours—is really intense" (LM 78).

Following that advice, Overt is puzzled by the letter he receives from St. George after his wife's death; in it, he contradicts his former dictum that his wife stood in the way of his artistic accomplishments. In fact, his letter suggests that his wife, by taking care of everything for him, enabled him to retire to the solitude of his studio and to write. Since both Overt and St. George agree that the quality of the latter's work declined during his recent years, the reader is left to wonder whether it declined because his wife and family interfered or because his wife, by shielding him from quotidian life and relegating him to a sterile isolation she judged essential for his art, deprived him of tensions that inspire creation. This is never made clear. Yet the most ambiguous line in this complex tale is the meaning of the lesson itself. Standing beside his fiancée, the woman Overt loved and renounced because of his advice, St. George remarks, "Consider at any rate the warning I am at present" (LM 95). At first, the warning seems unequivocal: "My artistic decline justifies your renunciation." But St. George's contented face and youthful demeanor as he anticipates remarriage to a woman he loves can convey another warning, the one Strether gave to Little Bilham in The Ambassadors, "live all you can; it's a mistake not to." James knew that such zealous devotion to art did not necessarily lead to holiness; it led to decadence as well, both in life and in art.

As in "The Lesson of the Master," "The Figure in the Carpet" contains a secret lesson that remains undeciphered even at the end. Similar to both "The Author of Beltraffio" and "The Lesson of the Master," this tale features an established author who is temperamental and self-contradictory. Although Hugh Vereker confesses to the narrator one night that critics have consistently overlooked the essence of his works, he later regrets sending the young man on a chase that yields nothing. Moreover, after a long and wearisome search for the "figure," the young man begins to think "the general intention a monstrous pose" (FC 236). The characters who devote their lives to the search for one clear "figure" in Vereker's art meet with misfortune and death.

On one level there is a thematic difference between "The Lesson of the Master" and "The Figure in the Carpet": The former is a parable about creation, the latter about criticism. But so much of "The Lesson of the Master" is taken up with the problem of interpretation, with young Overt's confusion as to what the Master's lesson is, that we can call both parables of interpretation. If "The Figure in the Carpet" explores the relation of an author to his work and the place of intention, the earlier tale explores the same. St. George has given Overt a text of his own to interpret, that of his lesson, and the intention behind that text is the thorn in the situation. Did St. George fabricate a theory of creation in order to eliminate his competition for the young woman he wanted to marry? Or did he intend to "save" the young writer from making the same "mistakes" he had, thereby protecting his disciple's career? We do not know, because Overt does not. And St. George is not sure himself, perhaps, because his creator leaves the question open.

In "The Figure in the Carpet" intention, or the intentional fallacy, provides the interest. When Vereker confides that there is an underlying "figure in the carpet," he refers to it as "a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mousetrap" (FC 233). Although these comparisons are not very flattering to the critic, who in one case releases something that undoubtedly flies away immediately, and in the other case reaches for bait prepared by the author but fatal to the critic, the young man ignores these characterizations of his task and chooses to call the pattern in the works "a sort of buried treasure" (FC 236). When his perusal of Vereker's books yields nothing, he is convinced that he was fooled by the author and that the "buried treasure" was a "bad joke" (FC 236). Vereker suggests that criticism acts as an initiation into the world of an author's works, but the young man discovers that his critical search of the novels destroys his former enjoyment of them. "Not only had I lost the books, but I had lost the man himself: they and their author had been alike spoiled for me" (FC 247).

In line with the narrator's suspicions about the "bad joke" and "the pose" is his vision of the search for the "figure in the carpet" as a game. Vereker himself, in referring to his relationship with the critics and the public, calls it a game as well. "I was accidentally so much more explicit with you than it had ever entered into my game to be, that I find this game—I mean the pleasure of playing it—suffers considerably. In short, if you can understand it, I've rather spoiled my sport" (FC 238). Whether Vereker means by "sport" his pleasure in mocking his critics or his engagement in a healthy antagonism with them is ambiguous. But his use of "game" is somewhat different in mood and tone from the narrator's. The latter's "game" is far more intense: he imagines his fellow critic Corvick and his fiancee playing chess with a phantom opponent whose ability to outwit them has already left the girl pale and wasted by the effort; he sees his friends and himself, all literary critics, as "grim gamblers at Monte Carlo" where "the stake on the table was a special substance and our roulette the revolving mind . . ." (FC 245).

The sinister atmosphere that pervades The Aspern Papers, published eight years earlier in 1888, dominates "The Figure in the Carpet" as well, particularly when the narrator in each work seriously entertains

the prospect of marriage for the sake of a literary dowry. In each case, the man in quest of literary booty subordinates life to art, and by this inversion he severs literature from its source in passion and in life, thereby aborting the quest. The sequence in this statement is one in which literature engenders life: "For the few persons, at any rate, abnormal or not, with whom my antecedent is concerned, literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honor, and honor meant passion, meant life."

As we have seen so far, more than the intention of the author, Vereker, comes into play here. The intentions of the critics trying to decipher the figure are as dubious. The narrator exhibits more interest in the development of his own career and reputation than in the books he is reviewing. It has been suggested that Corvick fabricates his discovery and Vereker's approval of it in order to marry Gwendolyn Erme, who is herself more interested in unlocking literary secrets than in revealing anything about herself in intimate personal relationships.

Everyone has intentions that can be served well by discovery of this "figure," which may not be there at all if Vereker's intention was just to set in motion this self-serving lot of critics to emphasize his own grievance that his works often get lost in the publishers' and critics' shuffle. If <u>that</u> is so, then Vereker, like James, is <u>pulling</u> the strings here, and the behavior also smacks a little of the charlatan. It would then become a literary version of "The Emperor's New Clothes," only with the emperor knowing very well that he is not wearing anything.

What <u>did</u> James have in mind? Risking a foray into his journals despite the warning in this story about intentions, we find that his idea was "that of the author of certain books who is known to hold—and to declare as much, au besoin, to the few with whom he communicates—that his writings contain a very beautiful and valuable intention, for those who read them with a right intelligence." James goes on to write that the author is convinced that the critics "don't know his work. . . . No reviewer, no 'critic,' has dreamed of it: lovely chance for fine irony on the subject of that fraternity" (NB 220). In his preface to the volume that contained the story in the New York Edition years later, James's intention seems to have shifted somewhat. His major emphasis in the preface is the plea for close analytic appreciation of texts, and he sees this artist parable to be an illustration of that need. The English-speaking world, he writes, has been marked by a "collective mistrust of anything like close or analytic appreciation," and "this old numbness of the general sensibility" that could see scarcely "half the intentions embodied" in a work was his subject in the story. In "The Figure in the Carpet" James wanted to "reinstate analytic appreciation" (AN 229).

Even if we accept that "The Figure in the Carpet" is a plea for criticism based on a search for intention, we are faced with several problems. First, with regard to James, which intention are we to take seriously, the one written at the time of composition, or the one written in retrospect? In the former, James deals with both the author and his critics more harshly. In the former, Vereker is happy not to confide in anyone, "His great amusement in life is really to see if anyone will ever see it," and he "plays" with the curiosity of the young critic, who asks him very naive and obtuse questions. Furthermore, it appears that the writer "doesn't care" what the outcome of all of this is. In the preface, James stresses the pain of the author at being misunderstood, "the poor man's attributive dependence, for the sense of being understood and enjoyed, on some responsive reach of critical perception that he is destined never to waylay with success." Is this the result of the accumulated frustrations of James's misunderstood works, particularly his theatrical projects? Is his disappointment seeping into his interpretation of his own intentions? Secondly, in the preface he writes that the story "exhibits a small group of well-meaning persons engaged in a test." Once again, the well-meaning nature here may be borne out in James's relation with his public, perhaps, but not by the text of the story. It is about people who are <u>not</u>

well-meaning, primarily people who hold back information deliberately for their own self-serving reasons, whether to procure money, fame, or a wife. And if this is a parable about the ethics of literary relationships, Vereker, the author, is not exempt from censure either. Unlike James, who did care about being misunderstood and spent a great deal of time explaining what he tried to achieve in his writings, Vereker revels in this secret that he let loose, and tests his readers unscrupulously. This is not a world of shared perceptions, but a world of tightly guarded secrets that may not exist at all, that may be a hoax. "The Figure in the Carpet" is an excellent example of Todorov's observation that "the Jamesian narration is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause" (145). Ultimately, the narrator is left with revenge as his sole form of consolation. Yet he is haunted by the suspicion that he missed something, and while he ostensibly means the "figure in the carpet," a literary revelation, we know, in keeping with James's insistence on blurring the distinction between art and life, that what he missed as an observer and player of games was life itself.

There have been complaints from James's detractors that he too withholds information from his readers, that he constructs irresolvable puzzles, figures in the carpet, that can never be deciphered. The most notable of these charges is that of Wayne Booth concerning the reliability of the governess in The Turn of Screw. Booth argues that once we eliminate the author's conscious intentions as evidence for interpretation, "The critic with the greatest persuasive power . . . wins." Moreover, he implies that authors have no moral right to confuse us in this way (370). It appears that Booth's assumption about literature is very close to the assumption operating in "The Figure in the Carpet," that is, that there is a real secret meaning in a work waiting to be unearthed. But this is a view that both the weight of the story and the different intentions cited by James seem to discredit. If James did indeed see the relation of authors and readers as such a sophisticated game of hide and seek, he would not have given us that pathetic metaphor of the chess game, nor characters amused by and staging the bewilderment of others.

The meaning of "The Figure in the Carpet" depends upon our notion of "meaning" and our concept of the relationship of literature and life. The more didactic our view of literature, the more we will see a real "figure" to be discovered in that carpet; the more autonomous we see the work of art, the more diffuse that figure becomes; the more sanctified the work of art, the less worthy the critics in the story of successfully finding it; and the more collective our concept of the creation of meaning, the larger that figure becomes, so that it takes on protean qualities, absorbing James's intentions, critics' interpretations, and the general question of morality and aesthetics.

The characters' names in these artist tales further demonstrate the inextricability of life and art that so preoccupied James. Mark Ambient is a fine example of a gospel name, with its strong moral force matched by an echo of "ambiance," with its aura of aestheticism. The moralistic wife is, predictably, named Beatrice, Beauty that leads to divine grace, but her distrust of beauty leads her to sin. Gwendolyn Ambient, an echo perhaps of infamous Nell Gwynn, actress and mistress to Charles II, is the image of the poseur and aesthete, yet she shows genuine compassion. She finally chooses the life of the convent. Henry St. George, the revered artist with the enigmatic advice, is patron saint of England, and Paul Overt is clearly his disciple, except that he perceives too overtly, and his literal-mindedness misguides him. Hugh Vereker's name sounds oddly similar to "you verify," which is precisely what Corvick and the narrator do for his "figure," through their lives, not through their readings of his works. And Corvick and Gwendolyn play a sinister game, his name bringing to mind a crow (crovus) picking over the carrion of the artist's work, his literal-mindedness rendering it lifeless.

In these tales, James uses the theme of the making of and understanding of art

as a metaphor of all human interaction, and he uses stories about human relations—tension between husband and wife, early career struggles, professional competition, and others—to comment on the nature of art. Life generates art, art generates life. In "The Author of Beltraffio" a reader's impassioned response to an artist's work affects not only the art, but also the author's life. In "The Lesson of the Master," it is the life of the impassioned reader that is affected, more by his attention to the author's life or judgment of his life, than by his works. And in "The Figure in the Carpet," the critic's life-denying, single-minded and misguided quest for one meaning in art is the figure in the carpet woven by James. Genuine understanding of Vereker's work would have convinced these self-destructive critics of the futility of that quest. In each case, when art and life are seen in steady opposition to each other, there are evil or tragic results. Yet all moral and aesthetic judgments depend upon just such an opposition. This perhaps is the fallen world of St. George and the real lesson of the master.

NOTES

[1]E. M. Forster's discussion of The Ambassadors in Aspects of the Novel stresses James's overemphasis on form. One of his best defenders against the charge that his subjects are narrow and elitist is Dorothea Krook in The Ordeal of Consciousness. For collections of assessments of James's achievment, see Dupee and Gard.

[2]James has been accused of naiveté and blamed for planting ideas of moral imperialism in his readers in Anderson's The Imperial Self.

[3]According to Jonathan Culler, one of the critical consequences of deconstruction is the recognition of how texts thematize interpretive operations and thus represent in advance the dramas that will give life to the tradition of their interpretation.

[4]James's original conception of the story is "the opposition between the narrow, cold, Calvinistic wife, a rigid moralist; and the husband, impregnated—even to morbidness—with the spirit of Italy, the love of beauty, of art, the aesthetic view of life . . ." (NB 57).

[5]James had already done this successfully in The Europeans (1878), where he contrasted the wit and contrivance of a sophisticated European woman to the Puritan forthrightness of her New England relatives, only to reveal how much affectation was necessary to achieve proper rustic sobriety.

Key to Works by Henry James

AB—"The Author of Beltraffio " in The Author of Beltraffio, The Middle Years, Greville Fane, and Other Tales. New York: Scribner's, 1909.

AN—The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James. Introd. Richard P. Blackmur. New York: Scribner's, 1934.

FC—"The Figure in the Carpet." In The Lesson of the Master, The Death of the Lion, The Next Time, and Other Tales. New York: Scribner's, 1909.

LM—"The Lesson of the Master." In The Lesson of the Master, The Death of the Lion, The Next Time, and Other Tales. New York: Scribner's, 1909.

NB—The Notebooks of Henry James. Ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961.

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