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GENERAL INTENTIONS, LITERAL MEANINGS, THE FIGURE IN THE CARPET, JAMES, TATE, AND I, THE READER

por

ERIC THOMAS FORTIER

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Área de concentração: Inglês e Literatura Correspondente
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_____
Maria Lúcia Barbosa de Vasconcellos
Coordenadora

BANCA EXAMINADORA:

_____
Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins
Orientadora e Presidente

_____
Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei
Examinador

_____
Maria Clara Bonetti Paro
Examinadora

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For my Dad, Conrad P. Fortier

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ABSTRACT

GENERAL INTENTIONS, LITERAL MEANINGS, THE FIGURE IN THE CARPET, JAMES, TATE, AND I, THE READER

ERIC THOMAS FORTIER

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA
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Supervising Professor: Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins

This thesis examines the 20th-century debate over one of the central topics in literary criticism. Despite persuasive counter-arguments, *intentionality* – the notion that the meaning of a literary work is what its author intended to say – continues to exercise its influence over many critics and readers. Here, the debate over intentionality is seen as more fundamentally a disagreement over the meaning of the word 'meaning.' The main theoretical paradigms employed represent each of the three sources or 'poles' of meaning: author (E.D. Hirsch), text (William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley) and reader (Stanley Fish). This examination proceeds in the context of two literary works which dramatize the quest for an author's intention: Henry James's tale "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896) and James Tate's poem "The Figure in the Carpet" (1997). Through detailed analyses of these two works, some of the ramifications of the three theories of meaning are considered and their concomitant interpretive methodologies critiqued.

Número de páginas: 122
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RESUMO

Esta dissertação investiga o debate do século XX sobre um dos assuntos principais em crítica literária. Apesar dos contra-argumentos persuasivos, *intencionalidade* – a noção de que o significado de uma obra literária é a intenção do autor – continua a influenciar vários críticos e leitores. Nesta dissertação o debate sobre intencionalidade é visto na sua essência como uma discordância sobre o significado da palavra 'significado.' Os principais paradigmas teoréticos usados correspondem às três fontes ou 'pólos' de significado: autor (E.D. Hirsch), texto (William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley) e leitor (Stanley Fish). Esta investigação situa-se no contexto de duas obras literárias que dramatizam a busca pela intenção do autor: o conto de Henry James "The Figure in the Carpet" ("A Figura no Tapete", 1896), e o poema de James Tate "The Figure in the Carpet" (1997). Através de análises detalhadas destas obras, algumas das ramificações das três teorias de significado são discutidas e as concomitantes metodologias interpretativas são avaliadas.

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Suppose you and I bump into each other in the street one morning. We shake hands and make a little small talk, during which I say, "I am going to town today." What is the meaning of my sentence? More importantly, how did you decide on the meaning? Most likely you did not *decide* anything at all: you simply heard what I said, and understood the meaning as you did so. But suppose I had said "I am going to down today." What is the meaning of *this* sentence? Is "down" the name of some new restaurant that just opened up, is it an acronym for some governmental department? Is it the latest dance craze or a new sport I never heard of? Is it something I am going to do today, or something I am going to do *to* today? Because the meaning of my sentence is unclear, several other meanings may cross your mind. Finally you will probably ask me to clarify myself, and I will tell you that yes, "down" is a restaurant where I am meeting a friend for lunch. It opened across the street from "up" just a few days ago.

While this kind of interpretive difficulty is easily resolved in conversation, it is not so easily resolved in a work of literature.[1] If a poem begins "I am going to down today" the reader does not have the option of asking the poet what she meant.[2] How is the reader to determine the meaning of such a line? This question is at the heart of one of the fundamental and most problematic topics in literary criticism. The matter of authorial intention – what the author intended to say – became a major point of controversy in the twentieth century as critics debated whether or not it should be a factor in interpreting and evaluating a literary work. While intentionalist critics believed that the meaning of a literary work could only be what its author meant, anti-intentionalists argued that the author

could not and should not be asked what she meant, and thus that the meaning could only be what she had succeeded in saying. It has proved impossible for any critic to remain neutral in this debate. Authorial intention pertains to all works of literature, and the critic must clarify her position before she proposes any interpretations or ventures any solutions to theoretical problems. “There is hardly a problem of literary criticism in which the critic’s approach will not be qualified by his view of ‘intention’” (*IF* 334).

But authorial intention is not merely a theoretical matter, restricted to the rarefied atmosphere of scholarly journals and graduate seminars. It has serious practical implications on literary education at all levels. If the author’s intention cannot be ascertained, on whose authority does the professor of literature profess the meaning of the work? And why should a student prefer the professor’s interpretation to her own? Authorial intention also has serious implications for the general reader. In many cases, reading is not a self-conscious process of deciding what the author meant. We do not ask ourselves what the author meant to say, because we assume that we already know: as in the case with “I am going to town today,” what the author meant to say is obvious. But not all literary meaning is as obvious as “I am going to town today.” If we cannot determine the meaning of a literary work by ourselves, how are we going to make sense of it, why should we bother reading it in the first place? How are we to discover the author’s intention, if the author has been dead for three hundred years? What is an intention, anyway? Is it a specific message the author wanted to communicate, something like “life is beautiful” or “war is bad”? If so, why didn’t the author simply tell us instead of making us guess? If you and I disagree over the meaning of a literary work, whose interpretation is correct, and on what grounds do we say that it is correct? In short, who decides what the meaning of a literary work is?

These questions might not be so difficult to resolve if we were able to agree on a definition of the word 'meaning.' As the critical literature suggests, the debate over authorial intention is more importantly a debate over a word whose meaning everybody understands but nobody agrees on. On one hand, it seems reasonable enough to equate meaning with the author's intention: even on the morphemic level the *meaning* of the literary work seems inextricably linked to what the author *means to say* when she writes it. But even a one-volume college dictionary provides more possible definitions than this: 'meaning' can include (a) "the thing one intends to convey", or *purport*; (b) "the thing that is conveyed", or *import*; and (c) a "significant quality", especially an "implication of a hidden or special significance" (*Webster's* 712). Critical theories are to a large extent characterized by the definition they propose for 'meaning,' and "divide easily, if roughly, according to their emphasis on work, author, or reader" (Booth 39). In other words, a particular critic will hold either that meaning is an inherent property of the work, that it is what the author intended (*purport*), or that it is what the reader understands (*import*). Let us examine the work of the leading proponents of each of these three sources or 'poles' of meaning.

The Work. In the early decades of the twentieth century some of the most eminent critics in the English-speaking world launched an attack on the then-prevalent Romantic strain of criticism which viewed the literary work as an expression of the author's personality. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) T.S. Eliot argues that poetry "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (*Essays* 10). The poet's job is not to assert her difference from previous poets, but to conform to a poetic tradition, which in turn rearranges itself to include the new poet's contributions into a cohesive whole. The poet does not *express* emotions, but painstakingly *constructs* them by

combining words, phrases and images which evoke particular "feelings" (8). The reader thus experiences an emotion "which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet" (11). Eliot's demands of the poet were echoed a decade later by I.A. Richards's demands of the critic. In *Practical Criticism* (1929) Richards outlines a critical methodology which divorces the poem from biographical considerations. He presents the results of a classroom experiment in which, in order to maximize the objectivity of literary judgments, students were asked to comment on poems whose authorship and dates of composition had been excised. The results are frequently comic, less for the extreme variance and frequent pettiness of the students' responses than for Richards's arrogant derision of them.

These authors laid the groundwork for the movement in Anglo-American letters which came to be known as the New Criticism, a cornerstone of which is William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946). The classic statement of the anti-intentionalist position, this essay proposes "the poem itself" (*IF* 334) as an objective, self-contained entity, a "verbal icon"[3] which is "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it" (335). The authors do not propose a definition of meaning but rather tell us how meaning is to be ascertained: through *internal* evidence, "through the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries" (339). It is not to be ascertained through *external* evidence – "revelations (in journals, for example, or letters or reported conversations) about how or why the poet wrote the poem" (339). Some gray area exists between the two kinds of evidence, and the authors allow for the use of biographical

evidence which, "while it may be evidence of what the author intended ... may also be evidence of the meaning of his words and the dramatic character of his utterance" (339).

The fact that they do not propose a definition of meaning leads us to conclude that, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, the definition goes without saying. The claim implicit in "The Intentional Fallacy" is that an appropriately "objective criticism" (336) will produce the objective meaning of the work. It is not the meaning itself that is evaluated in Wimsatt and Beardsley's model, but rather the poem's effectiveness in producing it: "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work" (335). For this reason the author's declarations about his intention are unnecessary and not to be attended to: "How is [the critic] to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem" (334-5).

The Author. The most comprehensive defense of the author's intention was put forth by E.D. Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). Hirsch argues that the meaning of a literary work is precisely "what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence" (*Validity* 8), and that this meaning is both determinate (self-identical and unchanging) and reproducible (sharable). All relevant evidence, internal and external, may be used to determine the intention (197). Hirsch does not tell us what to do with express statements by the author about her intention, but this point would seem to be mooted by his limitation of meaning to *verbal meaning*: "whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs" (31). Even if the author did tell us, her intention would not count as the verbal meaning unless that intention could also be ascertained from the work alone. Despite

his ostensible opposition to their theory, in this respect Hirsch closely resembles Wimsatt and Beardsley: the author's intention is to be sought, but only to the extent that it is evidenced by "the poem itself."

Hirsch's theory also recalls Wimsatt and Beardsley's in that his overarching aim is to demonstrate the feasibility of objectively valid interpretation. He rejects, however, the notion that "the poem itself" can serve as a normative standard for interpretation. The literary work does not have its own inherent meaning, as Wimsatt and Beardsley argued. Meaning is not *in* language but is "an affair of consciousness" (*Validity* 23): as almost any linguistic sequence can represent more than one meaning, a literary work "means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it" (4). While "the poem itself" may be said to exist, insofar as it is a sequence of black marks on a page, the agency of an author or a reader is required to turn those marks into units of meaning. But it is utterly unfeasible to base a discipline of interpretation on something as variable as the reader's understanding of a work. Even the best critics disagree about the meanings of works, and without some standard by which to discriminate between them the critic has no grounds on which to claim that her interpretation is better than the next. To posit a critic's interpretation of the work as the 'best' meaning is simply to make that critic the author of the best meaning, and as Hirsch rightly asks, why should that critic be the author of the best meaning rather than the original author? Rejecting both the reader and "the poem itself" as the source of meaning, Hirsch proposes the author's intention as "the only compelling normative principle" by which an interpretation may be judged as correct or incorrect (5). Hirsch allows that the meaning of a literary work can always be related to something else -- a historical or biographical context, the reader's response, a critical discourse, and so forth. This relationship between the meaning and something else is the

work's *significance* (8). While a discussion of significance is a legitimate aim of criticism, it must nevertheless be grounded in the correct interpretation of the author's intention (57).

A principal caveat of Hirsch's argument is that it is directed toward situations in which "interpretation is conceived of as a corporate enterprise" (*Validity* 25). Unlike the textual editor, for example, who "owe[s] professional allegiance to the author's original meaning" (89), the general reader, reading for pleasure in her bedroom, is not obliged to aspire to philological objectivity. Whether or not the general reader chooses to adopt the author's intention depends upon the goal the reader sets for herself. Hirsch argues that, as literature has a vital communicative function, an ethical obligation to seek the author's intention obtains even for the general reader; but he concedes that nothing in the nature of the text demands the adoption of the author's intention as a normative standard.

The Reader. In their continuing crusade in defense of "the poem itself," Wimsatt and Beardsley published a second essay which targeted the attempt "to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem" (*AF* 401). In "The Affective Fallacy" (1948) they distinguish between what the poem *is* and what the poem *does* to its reader. This essay provided the catalyst for Stanley Fish's rigorous advocacy of the role of the reader in the construction of literary meaning. In the volume of essays collected as *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), Fish argues that the focus of criticism should be precisely on what the poem *does*: "the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning" (3). Fish's theory begins as an argument against the New Critical conception of the literary work as a verbal icon, as a spatial entity rather than a temporal one. Meaning is not determined at the *end* of one's reading of a text, when one has collected all the facts; reading occurs in time, and the variety of false starts, revisions, projections, and disappointed expectations which the reader experiences are not impediments to determining

the meaning but in fact *constitute* the meaning (26-7). Fish describes his methodology as "substituting for one question – what does this sentence mean? – another, more operational question – what does this sentence do?" (25).

Like Hirsch, Fish challenges the New Critical notion that meaning is *in* the text:

> The category "in the text" is usually thought to refer to something that is irreducibly there independently of and prior to all interpretive activities ... [but in fact] what is perceived to be "in the text" is a *function* of interpretive activities, although these activities are performed at so primary a level that the shapes they yield seem to be there before we have done anything. (273-4)

Even such an obvious formal feature as an *abba* rhyme scheme is not *in* the text until a reader looks for, and finds, an *abba* rhyme scheme. Once found, the rhyme scheme becomes a clear 'fact' of the text. But a reader who is more concerned with counting the number of vowels per line, or determining the ratio of passive to active constructions, may locate an entirely different set of 'facts.' The text has no existence prior to interpretation: it is the reader who brings the text into existence by deciding what she will look for and what will count as a 'fact.'

The chief argument against this theory is that it precipitates a state of interpretive anarchy, leaving readers free to construct whatever meanings they want. On these grounds no interpretation, no matter how ludicrous, could be dismissed as incorrect. As Fish argues, this fear is unwarranted. An interpretation is always constrained -- not by anything *in* the text, but by the conventions of an "interpretive community" to which the reader belongs:

> Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (171)

The text and the author's intention are not objective entities but are in fact constructed by the reader. But the reader is not a free agent who can simply construct whatever texts and

intentions she wants; she is herself constructed by the interpretive community: “an individual’s assumptions and opinions are not “his own” in any sense that would give body to the fear of solipsism. That is, *he* is not their origin ... rather, it is their prior availability which delimits in advance the paths that his consciousness can possibly take” (320). The distinction between the three poles of meaning is, therefore, an illusion: “the entities that were once seen as competing for the right to constrain interpretation (text, reader, author) are now all seen to be the *products* of interpretation” (16-17).

Fish’s theory of the interpretive community provides a functional account for both the similarities between interpretations and the differences between them. Within a given interpretive community, some meaning will always appear as obvious, as the *literal meaning* of the text, because it is the product of the strategies the interpretive community sets in place. A different interpretive community, approaching the text with a different set of strategies, will construct a different meaning which, to them, is just as obvious or literal. The text will always have a literal meaning, but the literal meaning may be different for every reader (268-92).

The above theorists agree that the meaning of a text can only be determined with reference to a context, although they disagree as to what the proper context for that meaning is. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the context is provided by the poem itself. The poem is a unified entity with a structural integrity, and thus the meaning of each part can only be determined with reference to the whole. At the same time, while it is independent of determinations by author and reader, the poem is not read in a vacuum. As their definition of “internal evidence” suggests, the poem itself is itself situated in a wider context which encompasses all of our linguistic and literary knowledge. For Hirsch, any correct guess about meaning can only follow from a correct guess about the type, or

intrinsic genre, of the utterance: "An individual trait [of an utterance] will be rootless and meaningless unless it is perceived as a component in a whole meaning, and this idea of the whole must be a more or less explicit guess about the kind of utterance being interpreted" (*Validity* 78). It is for this reason that Hirsch criticizes Richards's methodology of removing dates and attributions before distributing poems to his students: all intentional evidence which helps the interpreter correctly assess the intrinsic genre is to be considered, as "All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound" (76). The reason that Fish insists that his theory of meaning will not result in interpretive anarchy is that an utterance never exists in isolation. The possibilities for interpretation are always constrained by the context of the utterance, and this context provides a norm for interpretation: "sentences emerge only in situations, and within these situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible" (307). Unlike Hirsch, however, Fish insists that the determination of the context does not occur *prior to* the determination of meaning, but rather that the two occur simultaneously and through each other.

Another point of agreement between these three theories of meaning is the stipulation that the meaning of a work is not reducible to a paraphrase, to some easily-articulated message or content. The New Critics, putting their emphasis on *how* the meaning of a poem is produced rather than on *what* that meaning is, hold that "the meaning of a poem is fuller than its paraphrasable idea ... the rhythms, the verbal texture, the associations of words, the atmosphere, all the elements, enter into the meaning" (Brooks and Warren, 473). For Hirsch, the word 'meaning' "embraces not only intentional objects but also the species of intentional acts which sponsor those intentional objects ... subjective feeling, tone, mood, and value, are constitutive of meaning in its fullest sense" (*Aims* 8). Fish claims that "the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but

certainly not to be identified with, its meaning. It is the experience of an utterance – all of it and not anything that could be said about it ... that is its meaning" (32).

By Way of a Conclusion

Wimsatt and Beardsley performed a valuable service for literary criticism by arguing that the poem is a work of art and not a document of the poet's beliefs or emotional state. The "poem itself" is to be seen as an objective entity independent of determinations by either the author or the reader. Unfortunately, no such thing exists. What the New Critics presumed to be objective entities were in fact nothing more than subjective interpretations. This much is suggested by the notion of judging the success of a poem on the grounds that it 'works': A poem succeeds "because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and 'bugs' from machinery" (*IF* 335). To claim that a poem contains only the relevant elements necessitates something that those elements can be relevant *to*. Wimsatt and Beardsley propose "the poem itself" as that thing, but fail to see the tautology their reasoning produces: the poem itself contains only those elements relevant to the poem itself. In short, the poem succeeds because it successfully produces the meaning the critic finds in it. How could it do otherwise?

Hirsch's argument that the meaning of the literary work is what its author meant is, as he admits, ultimately a matter of choice, and there is little need to make a comprehensive rebuttal here. His argument is persuasive insofar as we are inclined to agree with his conclusion. My main complaint with it, worth mentioning here, is a matter of semantics. Hirsch's theory may at first glance seem much more stodgy and hard-line than it in fact is, simply because he insists on using the word 'meaning' to designate the author's intention.

To the extent that the author's intention can be ascertained, it is not necessarily a thing that readers will care to think of as the *meaning* of a literary work. Hirsch provides a hypothetical example: "A poet intends in a four-line poem to convey a sense of desolation, but what he manages to convey to some readers is a sense that the sea is wet, to others that twilight is approaching" (*Validity* 12). According to Hirsch, the sense of desolation is nevertheless the meaning of the poem, because it is what the poet intended to convey. But to insist that the meaning of a work can be something which is not even successfully expressed is to treat the word 'meaning' very callously, and we are likely to reject Hirsch's theory simply because it affronts our expectations of what the word 'meaning' should refer to. [4] The word 'meaning' functions very much like the word 'love.' Although it may be defined, it is impossible to define to everyone's satisfaction. The word suggests a general category which always overflows whatever definition is assigned to it. It is difficult to imagine that any two people mean the same thing by it, and yet each person knows exactly what she means when she uses it. Moreover, one does not judge one's love by someone else's definition of the word.

We saw above that one of the definitions my dictionary provided for 'meaning' was a "significant quality" (*Webster's* 712). It is ironic that a definition for the word 'meaning' should be this vague, but it is an important definition, as it suggests a universally acknowledged and widely used sense of the word. We can perhaps lend a little precision by suggesting that 'meaning' in this sense is the value or importance of a particular object to a particular subject, what we might call the object's *meaningfulness*. An example of this sense of the word can be found in Fish's acknowledgments to *Is There a Text in This Class?*, where he writes that "Jane Parry Tompkins has encouraged me and inspired me and given meaning to everything in my life" (vii). The *meaning* of a work, in any of the three

definitions we have been examining, is less important than its *meaningfulness* to the reader. When we say that we find a poem meaningful we are not referring to the fact that the poet intended something by it, or to the fact that we understood something from it. We are referring to the fact that what we understood is extremely valuable to us, that we cherish it and consider ourselves in some way ennobled by it.

As we can see, the battle for supremacy among the three poles of meaning is unduly complicated by the battle for possession of the word 'meaning.' In order for these theorists to use the word 'meaning' they must first define it as something, as by itself it means nothing very specific. The words they define it with, however ('the poem itself,' 'the author's intention,' 'the reader's response'), have greater descriptive accuracy than the word they attempt to define. Fish suggests that the word should be eliminated, "since it carries with it the notion of message or point. The meaning of an utterance, I repeat, is its experience" (65). In doing this, he severs the word from one prescriptive definition only to attach it to another one. Obviously the word 'meaning' must mean something beyond what these theorists attempt to define it as, or they wouldn't be in such a hurry to appropriate it for their own exclusive use. Through the 'meaningfulness' definition, the word 'meaning' acquires a certain cachet, which these theorists attempt to capitalize on by arguing for exclusive use of the word 'meaning.' Perhaps we should take Fish's suggestion literally and abandon our usage of the word 'meaning' altogether. Instead of asking the question, "What is the meaning of this work?" we would ask, variously, "what was the author's intention? What are the 'irrefutable facts' of the text? And what is my experience reading it?" While this does not resolve the theoretical controversy, it at least clarifies the terms of discussion. If the reader is to go tilting after windmills, she at least has a clearer understanding of which windmills she is tilting after.[5]

Fish's reader-oriented approach seems to me both the most accurate and the most practical of the models outlined above, and I accept the majority of his conclusions in this thesis. I disagree with him on one point, however. Although his theory of the interpretive community would seem to suggest that all readings of a text are legitimate, in the sense that they are all *literal* readings, Fish argues that they are nevertheless expected to fall within certain conventional guidelines: "the activity of interpretation ... is determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of interpretive strategies" (342). We thus have a practical principle for excluding interpretations which do not defer to the authority of the literary institution: "The fact that [idiosyncratic interpretations] *are* ridiculous, or are at least perceived to be so, is evidence that we are never without canons of acceptability; we are always "right to rule out at least some readings"" (349).

Where do these canons of acceptability come from? Are the strategies of the literary institution *decided* by its constituents, or are they presented to them as an inflexible norm to which their own strategies must defer? Although readers within the literary institution – students in a university literature classroom, for example -- may be *expected* to adhere to the authorized interpretive strategies, they do not necessarily do so. When a student enters the classroom, she is not simply an empty vessel waiting to be filled with strategies for interpreting texts. She has already passed through a great many interpretive communities and has acquired a variety of interpretive strategies. She is, so to speak, an 'interpretive community of one' whose set of strategies is a unique pastiche of all the strategies she has learned from all the interpretive communities to which she has belonged. Consequently, the readings she produces may strike her fellow students as idiosyncratic. The fact that an

idiosyncratic reading is ruled out makes it no less the literal meaning of the text for that student, and for good reason -- it is not the *text* that rules out such a reading.

The student is thus forced to make a choice when she walks into the classroom: she has already understood the literal meaning of the text, and she must now either fight for her reading or re-interpret the text in accordance with the strategies authorized by the literary institution. What can be the purpose of re-interpreting the text, when she has already understood the literal meaning? One could argue that there is greater value in a shared meaning than in a merely private one, although I do not see why. The meaning of a text is always constructed privately, during the act of reading. Even when students read a text together in class, they still construct the meaning privately, although they may later collaborate in the construction of another meaning. This collaborative meaning may even be the more persuasive one, but the students would not have been able to collaborate in the first place had they not already privately constructed some meaning or other.

At any rate, there is no *de facto* reason why either meaning should be better than the other. To privilege either one of these meanings presumes an implicit decision about the function of the text. Earlier I suggested that the disagreement over authorial intention is a manifestation of a more fundamental disagreement about the *meaning* of the literary work. In the same way, the disagreement about meaning is a manifestation of an even more fundamental disagreement about the *function* of the literary work. Despite over three thousand years of literary production, nobody has ever conclusively proven what a literary work is supposed to *do*. The disagreement over the function of literature is in fact a covert agenda in the three critical programs outlined above. While Wimsatt and Beardsley presume the poem as an object of strictly aesthetic appreciation (studying “the poem itself” is something like studying the aesthetic properties of a fork without mentioning that it can

also be used to eat with), Hirsch's advocacy of the author's intention implies the function of literature as a mode of communication ("when we fail to conjoin a man's intentions to his words we lose the soul of speech, which is to convey meaning and to understand what is intended to be conveyed"; *Aims* 90), and Fish's advocacy of the reader implies its function as an object which produces an effect which is itself significant. One reason why there is no agreement between these parties, I suggest, is quite simply because there is no need for one. To view the literary work as fulfilling one of these functions in no way prevents the reader from viewing it as fulfilling another function as well. If there is no consensus about the function of the work, there can be no consensus about its meaning, for how can the meaning of a work be determined without reference to its function? Among these conflicting theories the reader is left to decide. Just as the poem may serve several functions for the reader, its meaning may proceed from several sources. This would seem to create a conflict between the meanings of a poem only if those sources were seen as discrete entities, rather than, as Fish sees them, the products of a single act of interpretation.

The Project, and Some More Conclusions

If the matter of authorial intention is a problem for all theorists, critics, students, professors and readers of literature, it is no less a problem for the authors themselves. Confronted with a reading public which frequently fails to perceive their intended meanings, authors are forced to consider the relevance of their own intentions to the meaning of their works. In their earlier essay Wimsatt and Beardsley mention an extreme form of intentionality, "the way of biographical or genetic inquiry, in which, taking advantage of the fact that [the poet] is still alive, and in the spirit of a man who would settle

a bet, the critic writes to [the poet] and asks what he meant" (*IF* 344). Half a century before the appearance of Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay, Henry James proffered his response to this very situation. In his tale "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896) an aging novelist invites a young critic to search for the "general intention" which runs through the entire body of his work (*FC* 369). Despite the extensive literature devoted to the topic since James's time, the question of whether or not a literary work means what its author says it means continues to trouble us. In a poem by James Tate, also entitled "The Figure in the Carpet" (1997), a standoffish 'author' is harassed by the efforts of an overzealous 'critic' to discover "what is on our minds" (*Shroud* 59). To some extent a verse adaptation of James's tale, Tate's poem abstracts the search for intention in order to suggest a general hermeneutic compulsion, a need to establish authority for human existence and create order out of chaos.

In this thesis I examine the issue of authorial intention and its relation to the meaning of the literary work. This examination proceeds through a discussion of the two 'versions' of "The Figure in the Carpet" by James and Tate. My procedure has not been the customary scientific method of formulating a hypothesis, gathering data and reaching a conclusion. If there is any truth to Fish's claims, all the data which would prove my hypothesis would only have come into view as a function of that hypothesis. My conclusions are therefore not located in a final chapter but are scattered throughout the thesis, which will perhaps best be read not as a linear argument, but rather in terms of thematic repetition and development. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, I have begun with my beliefs, and my procedure has been to scrutinize these beliefs in a dialectical fashion in the hope of making them more sound. In the interest of clarity, let me declare some of these beliefs up front.

This thesis is directed against any notion of 'literary competence.'[6] A theory of literary interpretation must deal with the meanings that actual readers make, not hypothetical ones. There is no body of knowledge prerequisite for a meaningful experience of literature: it has even been said that a reader with an attentive ear to the *ottava rima* may perceive much of the sense of *The Divine Comedy*, though she lacks any knowledge of Italian. Understanding is a primary goal of reading, and a reader cannot understand a work by using knowledge she has not acquired. A ten-year-old's interpretation of a tale by James may seem reductive, trite or just plain wrong by my standards; but so may my interpretation seem trite by the standards of a professional critic, and so may that critic's interpretation seem trite by the standards of the ten-year-old.

Similarly, this thesis is directed against the notion that "the interpreter's task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one" (Iser 22). There is no limit to the potential meanings of a text, and a criticism which concerns itself with potential meanings, rather than the actual meanings that actual readers make, dooms itself to pointlessness. As far as I know, the goal of most readers is not how they *can* understand a text, but how they *do* understand it, and it is perhaps a more relevant goal for the critic to provide an accurate description of a single understanding, the *literal meaning* of the text. This sets no limitations on the potential meanings of a text. Readers will always continue to understand new meanings; but until they do, it seems fruitless to talk about them.

Most importantly, this thesis is directed against any notion of objective meaning. No interpretive approach can offer any certainty that the objective meaning of the work has been reached: even Hirsch's method aspires to no more than the "agreement that truth has *probably* been achieved" (*Validity* ix; my emphasis). We can, however, be certain that a

subjective meaning has been reached, and this would seem to be a more practical interpretive goal. In a discussion of visual perception, the philosopher of science Norwood Russell Hanson arrives at this very conclusion:

> It is always hazardous to argue from what is in one's field of vision to what there *is*. But it is never hazardous to assert what it is that occupies one's field of vision – indeed, in a queer sense of "wrong," we could never be wrong in our reports of what occupies our field of vision. How could we misidentify the objects of our private experience? (73-4; my emphasis)

We cannot know what exists; but we can know what we see. We cannot know what a text means, but we can know what we understand the text to mean. The inevitable subjectivity of literary interpretation is a primary theme in this thesis.

For Hirsch, the ultimate goal of literary interpretation is a consensus about the meaning of the work. Why is such a consensus necessary? Nothing in the nature of the literary work requires that its readers agree about what it means; many readers never even discuss their interpretations with anyone. The need for a consensus about the meaning of the literary work is only a function of a particular social group within which that meaning is being discussed, and before we bend over backwards for the sake of achieving a consensus we should first ask ourselves if there is any practical need for one. In private reading situations, in classrooms, and even in most critical situations, there is no practical need for a consensus; it is in fact the *lack* of a consensus that accounts for the thriving of literary criticism. Critical goals such as the attempt to "stop the endless debates among critics" (Rimmon xi) will hopefully never be realized.[7]

My focus in the following chapters has not been on producing readings of the two versions of "The Figure in the Carpet" but rather on using those readings as a platform for a discussion of authorial intention. Whatever conclusions I arrive at are not intended as general recommendations but rather as stepping-stones in my personal development as a

reader. Whatever theoretical concepts I introduce are attempts to formalize my own understanding and are not meant as recommendations for understanding the works. This may seem like an unnecessary caveat to make, but it strikes me as worth making. My aim is not to persuade the reader that *this* is what the works objectively mean, but to describe my own subjective understanding as accurately as possible. That being said, I still argue for the validity of these readings as 'traditional' readings. This is particularly the case with my reading of James: my emphasis has been on aspects neglected by other critics and on rebutting those readings which I feel 'miss the point' of the tale (in the words of one of the characters, to tell the truths other critics "funked"). Chapter 1 begins with a brief history and analysis of the criticism attendant to James's "The Figure in the Carpet", followed by a reading of the tale itself. In my reading, I explore some of the ramifications of both the intentionalist and anti-intentionalist approaches by comparing the fates of the characters who search for the novelist's intention. I explore these ramifications again in Chapter 2 through an analysis of my own problematic attempt to make sense of Tate's "The Figure in the Carpet". In neither reading do I mean to suggest that the work implicitly attacks or defends any of the theoretical positions we have been discussing. My readings are the product of my theoretical perspective, and for this reason I have attempted to elucidate that perspective in this introduction. For a reader approaching these works from another perspective, my readings will not appear as an accurate description, and I can only quote the novelist in James's tale when he says: "I do it in my way ... Go *you* and don't do it in yours" (*FC* 369).[8]

[1] Except in specific instances, such as my discussion of Barthes in Chapter 2, the terms 'literary work,' 'work,' 'text' and 'poem' should henceforth be taken to refer to the same conceptual entity. As different authors give preference to one or another of these terms, I have tried to follow their usage. By the same token,

terms such as 'poem' and 'novel' are in most cases meant as hypothetical substitutions for the literary work in general.

[2] Except where I refer to specific authors and characters, the feminine form of the third-person pronoun will be used throughout this thesis.

[3] This phrase does not appear in the essay but is the title of the book in which "The Intentional Fallacy" was reprinted: William K. Wimsatt, Jr. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry.* Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1954.

[4] In a later work, *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976), Hirsch concedes that his earlier definition of meaning was too narrow, and redefines it as "that which a text is taken to represent. No normative limitations are imported into the definition, since under it, meaning is simply meaning-for-an-interpreter" (79). This definition, which refers to the same category as Fish's 'literal' meaning, strikes me as the more useful.

[5] However, as many of the authors discussed in this thesis do use the word 'meaning,' this is not the place to dispose of it altogether. At the very least clarity will be served by a consciousness of the various uses of the word, and where I employ it, I have tried to specify the sense in which it is intended.

[6] The notion of literary competence, which owes itself largely to Noam Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence, is frequently invoked when a critic means to refer to a body of knowledge deemed necessary for an adequate understanding of the literary work. One manifestation of it is the structuralist notion of the ideal reader, "who would have at his or her disposal all of the codes which would render [the literary work] exhaustively intelligible" (Eagleton 121).

[7] Ironically, the works Rimmon discusses, including "The Turn of the Screw" and "The Figure in the Carpet", owe their critical longevity precisely to these endless debates.

[8] This injunction could be construed as ambiguous, but I do not intend any ambiguity in my usage of it here. Rather than negating the imperative "do it in yours," I read the "don't" simply as a rhetorical emphasis, so that the 'final meaning' of the sentence would be "Go you and do it in yours."

CHAPTER 1

SEEING IS BELIEVING: THE SUBJECTIVITY OF LITERARY PERCEPTION

The narrator of Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet" is a literary critic for a newspaper called *The Middle.* He writes a review of the latest novel by Hugh Vereker, and has the chance to win the novelist's praise for his "acute little study" (*FC* 363) when he attends a party at which "the great man" is also present (359). Vereker, unaware that the narrator is the author, is unimpressed with the review, and dismisses it in front of the guests as "the usual twaddle" (362). Later in the evening, having learned of his identity, an apologetic Vereker takes the narrator aside and reveals a long-guarded secret: his novels are informed by a "general intention" (369), an "exquisite scheme" (366) which runs throughout his novels but which no one has ever discovered. To Vereker, this general intention is the very point of the novels, and the critics' inability to perceive it has led him to doubt his worth as a novelist: "It's quite with you rising young men," he says, "that I feel most what a failure I am!" (365). The narrator, who suggests that it is "something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet" (374), resolves to find the general intention, and in a "maddening month" pores through Vereker's novels (370). He finds only that "my new intelligence and vain preoccupation damaged my liking" (370), and concludes that "the general intention [was] a monstrous *pose*" (370).

Vereker soon regrets having revealed his secret and asks the narrator not to repeat it. But the narrator has already repeated it: George Corvick, his editor at *The Middle*, has taken up the quest for the figure in the carpet. Vereker does not share the narrator's belief that Corvick's possession of the secret may "really lead to something" (*FC* 373), but he takes an interest in the fact that Corvick is joined in the quest by his fiancée, Gwendolen Erme.

"That may help them," Vereker says, "but we must give them time!" (373). Corvick and Gwendolen indeed take their time, taking Vereker "page by page, as they would take one of the classics, inhal[ing] him in slow draughts" (375), but fail to find the figure. Corvick takes a job as a foreign correspondent and after six months in India sends Gwendolen a telegram announcing his discovery of the figure: "Eureka. Immense" (381). He rushes off to Italy where Vereker confirms the discovery as "not a note wrong" (383). Gwendolen writes him for news, but Corvick replies that he will only tell her the figure after they have married. The narrator also begs for news, but Corvick will only say that he has begun an "exhaustive study" which will reveal "the unimagined truth" about Vereker's novels (387). A sick brother calls the narrator to Germany, and in his absence Corvick returns to England and is quickly married to Gwendolen. On their honeymoon, Corvick is killed while driving a dog-cart. His study of Vereker is left a "mere heartbreaking scrap" which does not reveal the figure in the carpet (389).

One by one the doors slam shut on the narrator's chances for enlightenment. He asks Gwendolen if Corvick revealed the figure to her before his death. "I heard everything," she says, "and I mean to keep it to myself!" (*FC* 390). Vereker dies. Gwendolen marries a critic named Drayton Deane and dies giving birth to her second child. In a last-ditch attempt the narrator approaches Deane and desperately proposes to pay any price for the "information" he believes Deane is in possession of. But Deane knows nothing. As the narrator relays the story Deane's curiosity mounts, and he too finds himself obsessed with the figure in the carpet. The two critics live out their days as fellow "victims of unappeased desire" (400).

R.P. Blackmur has claimed that there is no body of literature "so eminently suited to criticism as the fiction of Henry James" (*Art* xv). Within that body of literature "The Figure

in the Carpet" seems particularly irresistible to literary critics. Its appeal is due to more than the simple fact that "literary critics like stories about literary critics" (Geismar 138): the tale offers the critic an opportunity to analyze not only the tale itself but also the tale's subject matter -- the art and craft of literary criticism. As Hana Wirth-Nesher suggests, any critic's interpretation of the tale will inevitably reflect that critic's presumptions and conclusions about her own profession:

> 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. (125)

The meaning of *any* work of literature, of course, depends upon our notion of 'meaning,' but "The Figure in the Carpet" makes the point particularly well, precisely because the content of Vereker's general intention is frequently presumed to refer to much more than simply the artistic intention of a fictional novelist. Evident in this passage, and in much of the criticism surveyed in this chapter, is a (possibly inadvertent) confusion between Vereker's general intention and what is imagined to be James's general intention. The search for a general intention in both works tends to be equated with the search for the *meaning* of those works, although at no point does Vereker refer to his intention as the *meaning* of his novels. This confusion between Vereker's work and James's is often so deeply entrenched that it is difficult to tell which work the critic is interpreting. James invites this confusion, of course, by inducing us to speculate about Vereker's general intention, providing clues to its nature while simultaneously withholding its contents. The critic is thrust into the questionable position of trying to interpret a work she has not read

and which does not exist. Vereker's oeuvre becomes a literary *tabula rasa*, a generic literary work which reflects the critic's own theoretical orientation. Any 'interpretation' of that oeuvre is virtually the critic's answer to the question of what literature in general means or can mean. It is thus no surprise that the tale has become the object of controversy. The published criticism has become a forum for the larger debate over the source of the meaning of the literary work. Because of the tale's ability to accommodate contradictory interpretations, advocates of each of the three poles of meaning (text, author, reader) will find their spokespersons in James's tale.

According to Frank Kermode, the critics are unanimous in their opposition "to any deflatingly 'referential' explanation" of James's tale (26). Richard A. Hocks finds "The Figure in the Carpet" to be a "dialectical inquiry into art and human relationships" which "thoroughly eludes any simple "aesthetic" interpretation" (53). For G.L. Hagberg the tale shows that "it is intrinsically futile to attempt to deliver *the* meaning of something as complicated, as lifelike, as a literary work" (148). Peter W. Lock claims that the tale is not "*about* anything: it is what it unfolds and it is what unfolds it" (167). It may be imagined that, like the narrator, critics only arrive at such conclusions after an arduous and frustrated attempt to discover the figure and thus 'solve' the tale. Blackmur's failure to discover a figure leads him to conclude that "The Figure in the Carpet" means "no more than that there is a figure in the carpet if you can imagine it for yourself" (*Blue* 204). Blackmur here recalls Wirth-Nesher, but while for Wirth-Nesher the subjectivity of meaning is a strength in the tale, for Blackmur it is clearly a weakness.

The most ambitious attempt to solve "The Figure in the Carpet" comes from Tzvetan Todorov, who "pick[s] up Vereker's gauntlet" (144) and proceeds to search for the general intention behind sixteen of James's tales. He finds that "The Jamesian narrative is

always based on *the quest for an absolute and absent cause*" (145). In "The Figure in the Carpet" the general intention is the *absence* which motivates the characters and *causes* the narrative (175). Todorov applies this principle not only to James's work but to Vereker's as well: Vereker's secret

> resides precisely in the existence of a secret, of an absent and absolute cause, as well as in the effort to plumb this secret, to render the absent present. Vereker's secret was therefore told to us, and this in the only way possible. If it had been named, it would no longer have existed, for it is precisely its existence which constitutes the secret. This secret is by definition inviolable, for it consists in its own existence. (175)

Todorov soon sees that he has laid a trap for himself. He has, in fact, violated the inviolable secret: "If Henry James's secret ... is precisely the existence of a secret, how does it come about that we can now name the secret, render absence present? Am I not thereby betraying the fundamental Jamesian precept which consists in this affirmation of absence, this impossibility of designating truth by its name?" (177). He concludes with a pyrrhic reformulation of his original hypothesis: criticism is "the search for truth, not its revelation ... Once this "reading of James" is over, we must then begin reading James, set out upon a quest for the meaning of his *oeuvre*, though we know that this meaning is nothing other than the quest itself" (177). This conclusion illustrates the dangers of confusing James's work with Vereker's. Vereker's secret is clearly more than "the quest itself": "it's naturally the thing for the critic to look for. It strikes me ... even as the thing for the critic to find" (*FC* 366). Vereker suggests that it *can* be named, and moreover *has* been named in his novels (367). Corvick apparently also names the figure. He communicates it both to Vereker and Gwendolen, and plans to reveal it in an article which will "utter ... the unimagined truth" about the novels (387).[1]

In his introduction to *The Act of Reading,* Wolfgang Iser makes a sustained attack on the attempt to reduce Vereker's general intention to a referential meaning. Iser distinguishes between the two critics' "totally different approaches to the fictional text" (10): meaning as *object*, represented by the narrator, and meaning as *effect*, represented by Corvick. The narrator searches for a meaning which is "precisely formulated on the printed page" (9) and can be subtracted from the text. This approach reduces the literary work to the status of a puzzle, and in solving that puzzle "there is nothing left for [the narrator] to do but to congratulate himself on this achievement" (4). Corvick, on the other hand, experiences Vereker's figure as a powerful and ineffable *effect*. This experience changes his life, but "all he can do is report this extraordinary change – he cannot explain or convey the meaning as the [narrator] seeks to do" (10). Iser makes a strong case for the irreducibility of the figure to any referential meaning. But in insisting on the ineffability of Corvick's experience, like Todorov he fails to account for the several occasions in the tale in which just such an experience is explained or conveyed.

Some critics, rather than speculating about the nature of the figure, have focused their attention on the quest itself. A point of contention in the criticism is the matter of whether or not James is being ironic in his presentation of the efforts of the two critics. Does "The Figure in the Carpet" implicitly defend or indict the quest for Vereker's intention? Lyall H. Powers finds Corvick and Gwendolen to be "ideal readers of Vereker's works" (102). Others (Hocks 51-3; Matthiessen 42) see the tale as a critique of the obsessive and destructive pursuit of the figure. Fred Kaplan goes so far as to say that "James mocks both readers who look for secret meanings and authors who pretend that there are secret meanings" (412). And Maxwell Geismar underscores the chameleonic

nature of the tale when he suggests that it "can be used either as an argument for "close analytical appreciation" – or more likely against it" (139).

For Geismar, it is more than James's ironic intent which is ambiguous: the figure in the carpet may be a figment of the narrator's imagination (137-8). This allegation is presumably grounded in the observation that the first-person narrator neither discovers the figure nor receives any proof that a figure has ever been discovered. Theories which claim either that the figure is a fraud or that it remains undiscovered mark a turning point in the criticism of "The Figure in the Carpet", and provide the groundwork for Shlomith Rimmon's influential study of ambiguity in James's tale. For Rimmon, the figure neither exists nor does not exist: the tale is entirely ambiguous, allowing the reader no possibility of choice between the two interpretations. Rimmon defines *narrative ambiguity* as the conjunction of mutually exclusive "finalized" hypotheses, and distinguishes it from such other cognate phenomena as subjective interpretations, plurality, allegory, and double meaning (9-16). She provides a resume of interpretations of "The Figure in the Carpet" which is worthwhile quoting at length:

> The two contradictory hypotheses are *a*, "There is a figure in Vereker's carpet"; $\bar{a}$, "There is no figure in Vereker's carpet." These propositions can be "realized" in various ways, and a whole network of *a*'s and *b*'s (based, of course, on the initial *a* and $\bar{a}$) can be formed. Each of these contraries has been proposed by critics as the best interpretation of the story. On the *a* side there are the following possibilities: (1) Corvick discovers the secret to Vereker's satisfaction and transmits it to Gwendolen who, in turn, withholds it from her second husband; (2) the secret exists, but all the "Virgilian intelligences" in the story fail to unearth it for reasons that are either personal (incapacity to love) or professional (wrong way of dealing with literature) or both; (3) the characters do not discover the secret, but it is indirectly communicated to us by the texture of James's story. On the $\bar{a}$ side there is a similar divergence into contrary *b*'s: (1) Vereker "invented" the idea of the figure in order to impress the young critic (that is, Vereker lies); (2) Vereker is deluded about his own work; he believes it to contain a central 'figure', while in fact it has none; (3) Vereker ironically propounds the notion of the secret as a joke directed against the ridiculous game of literary criticism; (4) Corvick, on his part, only pretends to have

> found the figure in order to force Gwendolen into marriage, and Gwendolen later cheats the narrator because she knows that in fact there is nothing to know. (11)[2]

Borrowing terms from the Russian Formalists, Rimmon recasts her definition of narrative ambiguity as "the coexistence of mutually exclusive *fabulas* in one *sjužet*" (41). The *fabula* is "the totality of actions in their "natural" chronological and logical order", the way things 'really happened.' The author shapes the *fabula* into a *sjužet* by distorting the chronology, selecting a point of view, and so forth. The *sjužet* is the "artistically shaped ... presentation of the *fabula*" (34-6).[3] In "The Figure in the Carpet", the content of the general intention is an "informational gap" which remains open even at the end of the tale. This gap, supported by ancillary gaps ("the omission of information which could act as univocal evidence"), can be filled by textual clues to support, with equal viability, either one of the two mutually-exclusive *fabulas*. James gives us nothing which would serve as *conclusive* evidence for either one (96-7). We see only what the narrator sees, and James sees to it that the narrator sees nothing that would prove either *fabula* as the 'correct' one.

Rimmon clearly demonstrates the ambiguity pertaining to the existence of the figure, but this ambiguity does not make "The Figure in the Carpet" an ambiguous tale. The ambiguity she observes is merely a function of her two "finalized" hypotheses, and disappears when we replace them with different hypotheses, such as *a*, "The narrator cannot be objectively certain that there is a figure in Vereker's carpet"; and $\bar{a}$, "The narrator can be objectively certain that there is a figure in Vereker's carpet." Of the two, *a* is the only valid choice. This neither validates nor invalidates the existence of the figure; it merely shifts the focus of the tale from the figure to the narrator. In this light, the story becomes a dramatization of the narrator's lack of knowledge rather than a dramatization of Vereker's hidden intention. Peter Halter claims that "the story consists of the *narrator's*

attempts to fill in the missing information" – not the *reader's*. Rimmon's exclusive concern with the existence or non-existence of the figure ignores the rich possibilities for interpretation in the relationships between the characters (Halter 28-9). It also ignores the intriguing question as to what, if it exists, Vereker's figure might be.

The inadequacy of Rimmon's definition of narrative ambiguity is perhaps better illustrated by another of James's 'ambiguous' tales, "The Turn of the Screw". The perennial debate surrounding this tale centers on the question of whether the governess who provides the first-person account actually sees ghosts or merely hallucinates them. The mutually exclusive "finalized" hypotheses Rimmon proposes for this tale are *a*, "There are real ghosts at Bly," and $\bar{a}$, "There are no real ghosts at Bly" (10-11). Again, new hypotheses can be proposed which emphasize the governess's lack of objective knowledge in the *sjužet* rather than the objective existence or non-existence of the ghosts in some unattainable *fabula*. The hypotheses I suggest are *a*, "The children see the ghosts," and $\bar{a}$, "The children do not see the ghosts." The governess herself is trying to decide between these hypotheses throughout the narrative, so the ambiguity is preserved, but as a function of the *sjužet* instead of as a function of two mutually exclusive *fabulas*. If Miles and Flora *do* see the ghosts, we have proof of their existence, and if they *do not* see them, we have proof that the governess is hallucinating.

But there is no evidence to support these hypotheses either; and even if there were, it would still prove nothing about the existence of the ghosts. The children claim to see nothing, but like the governess their reliability is in question. Mrs. Grose, however – who is perhaps the most reliable character -- claims to see nothing when Miss Jessell appears by the lake (James, *Stories* 720). This should be sufficient proof that the governess is hallucinating, and yet the following day Mrs. Grose reiterates her belief in the ghosts (727).

That she believes where she does not see is due to the fact that she subscribes (as does the governess, as do the critics) to one of the traditional principles of ghost lore: the existence of ghosts does not depend upon their visibility. Some people can see them, others can't.

So are the ghosts real? They are to the governess. *She* does not know if the ghosts exist or are merely hallucinations; she only knows that she *sees* them. The reader may believe her or not, but the text provides no authorization for either view -- the objective existence of the ghosts simply cannot be determined. In Todorov's view, "The Turn of the Screw" is a "narrative of a perception" (156) in which the reader sees "only the vision of someone and never the object of that vision directly" (150). Todorov sees this technical characteristic as "the constructive principle of [James's] *oeuvre*" and as a manifestation of his hypothesis about the general intention of James's tales (150-1; see above):

> To the question as to what really happened at Bly, James offers an oblique answer: he discredits the word "really," he asserts the uncertainty of the experience when confronted with the stability – but also with the absence – of the essence. In fact, we do not even have the right to say "the governess is..." or "Peter Quint is not...." In this world, the verb *to be* has lost one of its functions, that of affirming existence and nonexistence. All our truths are no better founded than that of the governess. (159)

Rimmon's 'ambiguous' readings of both "The Turn of the Screw" and "The Figure in the Carpet" explain by means of two mutually exclusive *fabulas* an ambiguity that is already taken for granted in the *sjužet*. These tales are not ambiguous; they are simply tales about ambiguous situations. Rimmon's notion of the *fabula* is as an objective reality which precedes the *sjužet*; the ambiguity is produced by the reader's frustrated attempt to answer the question, *Which explanation is true to reality?* (134). But there *is* no reality, there is no *fabula*; there is only the *sjužet*. The question can only be answered by stepping outside the *sjužet*, by comparing the *sjužet* with the two *fabulas*; and these *fabulas* are unattainable. From whose point of view would the objectively true *fabula*, if it existed, be narrated? Any

other first-person narrative would be merely another subjective interpretation of reality, and as such no more or less reliable than the one we already have. These tales dramatize the subjectivity of perception; the attempt to determine an objective reality simply misses the point. As the narrator of James's "The Real Thing" says, "I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they *were* or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question" (*Stories* 38-9).

Studies of "The Figure in the Carpet" which followed in Rimmon's wake have had to respond, in one way or another, to her charge of ambiguity. J. Hillis Miller considers Rimmon's definition of narrative ambiguity "a misleadingly logical schematization of the alogical in literature" (112). For Miller, James's tale is not an example of ambiguity but of "unreadability": the variety of interpretations suggested by the tale "are not merely alternative possibilities" but imply and necessitate each other (112): "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" (113). Rachel Salmon disputes Rimmon's insistence on reading the tale as a perpetual oscillation between two contradictory hypotheses, and suggests that the reader can experience both hypotheses simultaneously as the experience of paradox. The apparent ambiguity of James's tale "can produce, eventually, a simultaneous perception: the figure exists for those capable of seeing it, but not for those who are incapable" (Salmon 801-2). We have already seen this conclusion in the work of Blackmur and Wirth-Nesher. For Salmon the subjectivity of the figure is an invitation to the reader to participate creatively in the work, to reenact "within himself that process by which meaning becomes luminous within the text" (800). The reader, in effect, "*becomes* the carpet bodying forth a figure" (802). Arguing against Miller as well as Rimmon, Peter Halter claims that James's tale is not unreadable, in the sense 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" (37).

Despite Rimmon's insistence on the impossibility of choosing between mutually exclusive hypotheses, many of the critics mentioned above have done just that, proposing univocal (i.e., unambiguous) readings of James's tale. Again, this fact may be better demonstrated by the similar critical history of "The Turn of the Screw", which, at least until now, boasts a more substantial literature than "The Figure in the Carpet". James's contemporaries read "The Turn of the Screw" as a straightforward ghost story. It was not until 1919, over twenty years after the publication of the tale, that the first allegation of the governess's insanity appeared in print (James and Beidler 130). Why did it take so long for the critics to recognize something that, for Rimmon, is so demonstrably *there*? According to Wayne C. Booth, at the turn of the century the unreliable narrator was still a relatively uncommon literary technique. With the arrival of Modernism a steady succession of unreliable narrators began to appear, and as critics developed a sensitivity to them they retrospectively began to question the reliability of the governess (Booth 366-7). The first critics to find ambiguity in "The Turn of the Screw" were not simply better readers; they were the first critics for whom ambiguity was something to look for. One wonders how the tale could have made any sense to previous critics, but apparently its success did not depend upon its ambiguity. James's contemporaries did not look for ambiguity because nothing in the tale prompted them to do so: it made perfect sense as a straightforward ghost story.

But contemporary readers still frequently fail to recognize ambiguity in James's tales. "The Turn of the Screw" still makes perfect sense as a straightforward ghost story, despite the fact that we are far better acquainted with ambiguity and unreliable narrators than James's contemporaries were. I myself, as a Master's candidate in English Literature, read the tale twice through (and enjoyed it immensely) as a straightforward ghost story before my reading of the criticism introduced me to the 'hallucination theory.' Rimmon provides an explanation for my tardy enlightenment:

> Perception of the ambiguity and the rate at which it is reached is ultimately a relative matter, conditioned by a variety of factors in the reader's personal make-up, as well as in his experience of literature. Many readers are capable of a passionate perusal of *The Turn of the Screw* ... without ever realizing [its] ambiguity; others may become aware of the ambiguity only in retrospect, once their search for a final solution lands them with equipollent "candidates" or once they have read an Edmund Wilson article on the ambiguity of Henry James .... (56)[4]

Apparently, ambiguity is only apparent to *some* readers, and even these readers may have to wait before they are able to perceive it. Although perception of ambiguity is related to experience of literature, it is also "conditioned by a variety of factors in the reader's personal make-up," although we are not told what these factors are or how we are to go about acquiring the necessary ones. From Rimmon's description, stumbling upon the ambiguity seems to be a largely accidental affair. Among the factors Rimmon mentions, there is only one which the reader has any real control over: if we do not instinctively know to look for ambiguity, and if we do not stumble over it in our clumsy bumbling through the text, we at least have recourse to experienced readers like Wilson to show us the way.

This is, of course, one of the ostensible purposes of criticism – to call our attention to aspects of the work which we may have missed – but it carries some serious implications. First of all, it renders the tale, in itself, incomplete. In a very real way the ambiguous "The Turn of the Screw" I am discussing here is not the tale I read twice

through, the tale written by James. It is the tale I came to know only after I had become acquainted with the criticism, a tale whose authorship is divided between James, Wilson, Rimmon, and others. Second, although Wilson is one of the experienced readers capable of recognizing ambiguity, he is perhaps *too* experienced -- to the point of being unreliable. Booth tells us that as critics gained experience in the new Modernist techniques, their heightened sensitivity to unreliable narrators often led them to find ambiguities where none exist. Wilson himself lauded Henry Miller's *Tropic* books as an ingenious ironic portrait of "the genuine American bum come to lead the beautiful life in Paris", only to find Miller repudiate any claim to irony: "The theme is myself, and the narrator ... is also myself" (Booth 367).

On the other hand, although Wilson may not be infallible, I am uncomfortable with the suggestion that the irony he found in the *Tropic* books simply did not exist. How can irony so clearly exist for Wilson, and just as clearly not exist for Miller? How can ambiguity so clearly exist for Rimmon, and just as clearly not exist for all the readers who passionately peruse "The Turn of the Screw" as a ghost story? Is ambiguity in the text, or isn't it? Judging by Rimmon's description, the ambiguity is a foregone conclusion. The perception of ambiguity is undoubtedly a relative matter, as Rimmon says, but not because of any mental deficiency or lack of experience on the reader's part, but because the ambiguity is not there in the first place:

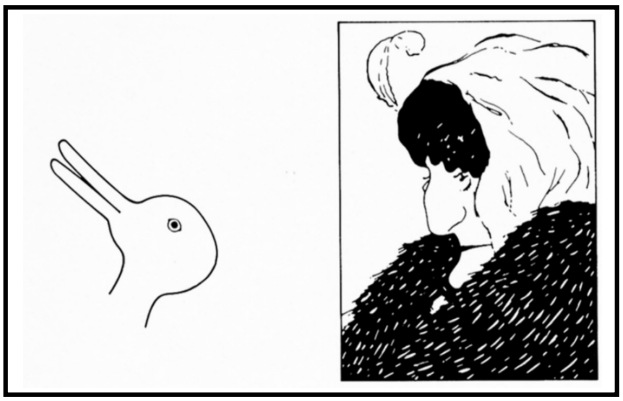
> Irony and ambiguity are not properties of language but are functions of the expectations with which we approach it. If we expect a text to be ambiguous, we will in the act of reading it imagine situations in which it means first one thing and then another (there is no text with which this cannot be done) and those plural meanings will ... be that text's literal reading. (Fish 277)

What Stanley Fish is proposing here is that neither irony, nor ambiguity, nor anything else is *in* the text. What we perceive to be in the text is merely the product of what we look for.

That we approach a poem looking for a metrical pattern or a rhyme scheme makes those things very easy to spot, and because they are so easy to spot, we assume that they were in the poem long before we ever opened the book. The reason so many readers miss the ambiguity in James's tales is because the ambiguity is not there to be missed: it does not exist until a reader looks for it and finds it.

Rimmon herself provides a perfect illustration of Fish's theory. In her preface, she quotes E.M. Gombrich to draw a parallel between narrative ambiguity and those ambiguous drawings in which one sees either a rabbit or a duck (*Figure 1a;* Hanson 90), a young woman or an old woman (*Figure 1b*), and so forth:

> we are compelled to look for what is 'really there', to see the shape apart from its interpretation, and this, we soon discover, is not really possible. True, we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also 'remember' the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly will we discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time. (ix)



(a) *(b)*

Figure 1.

Rimmon is using the rabbit/duck drawing to make the somewhat different point that, although we cannot experience the rabbit and the duck at the same time, the two contradictory interpretations are *in* the drawing. While this would seem to be incontestable,

we only know that the rabbit and the duck are both in the drawing because we are told that they are, and it is only because we are told that they are that we bother to look for them. If what Gombrich says is true, it is quite likely that a person who did not know that the drawing was intended to be ambiguous would see only the rabbit. But we always recognize these drawings as ambiguous, precisely because they are always presented as illustrations of ambiguity. We may not see the young woman, but we know she is there; the caption says so. Perhaps an even better example is the Magic Eye series of art posters, in which a seemingly abstract pattern can be made to reveal, through an adjustment of ocular focus, a three-dimensional image of a unicorn, a sailboat, and so forth. The viewer generally requires some measure of instruction before she can see the image, and the Magic Eye Corporation graciously provides instructions for this purpose (*Magic* 1).

James's tales, of course, are accompanied by no such captions or instructions. The ambiguity that Rimmon finds in them is not authorized by James's intention or by the text itself but is simply the result of the search for ambiguity, and its only 'authorization' comes from critics like Rimmon who believe it is there. Critics like Salmon and Halter, however, who are familiar with Rimmon's analysis of "The Figure in the Carpet" and nevertheless propose univocal readings which assert the existence of the figure, believe it is *not* there, and in doing so they are not simply ignoring the clear facts of the text. There is no scientific way to explain why they read the tale the way they do, but it seems inaccurate to speak of their readings as a choice between mutually exclusive interpretations. A reader does not *choose* to understand a text as ambiguous or univocal. She simply understands, and although she may later understand something different, she cannot choose to understand what she does not understand. Earlier I claimed that we cannot be objectively certain that Vereker's general intention exists. In the remainder of this chapter I will present a univocal

reading of "The Figure in the Carpet" which asserts that it *does* exist. This may seem logically inconsistent, but literary interpretation, in this case at least, is not governed by logic. I *believe* my reading (otherwise I would never have understood it this way), and although I am capable of recognizing the ambiguity now that it has been pointed out to me, I cannot choose to understand "The Figure in the Carpet" as an ambiguous tale. The meaning of a literary work is not a *potentiality* but an *actuality*. It is not how we *can* interpret the tale that matters; it is how we *do* interpret it.

Although "The Figure in the Carpet" dramatizes some of the devastating consequences of the reification of the author's intention, the three primary characters are all ardent intentionalists in the strictest sense of the word. From the moment they learn of it Corvick and the narrator unhesitatingly accept Vereker's intention as *the* thing to be discovered in his work. Much of the criticism surveyed above focuses on the efforts of the two critics to discover Vereker's general intention. Vereker, meanwhile, gets lost in the shuffle, and criticism that concentrates on attacking or defending the tenability of the quest overlooks the equally important questions of what Vereker's intention might be and what might be his interest in seeing that intention correctly perceived. Whereas for the critics the quest for the general intention represents a need to understand, for Vereker it represents the need to be understood.

If Vereker needs to be understood, why doesn't he simply *tell* the critics what his general intention is? Why won't he, as the narrator asks, "assist the critic" (*FC* 366)? First, Vereker does not want to have to explain his novels. To do so would be to admit his failure to communicate his meaning, a failure he already suspects: "It's quite with you rising young men," he says, "that I feel most what a failure I am" (365). This could explain

Vereker's regret about having revealed his secret to the narrator: as long as nobody knew the general intention was there, the failure to discover it could easily be attributed to the critics. But if critics began to search in earnest and still failed to find the general intention, Vereker's competence as a novelist would be seriously in doubt.

Second, Vereker *has* told the critic his general intention. "I've shouted my intention in his great blank face!" (*FC* 366), he says; the obscurity of his novels is an unfortunate accident. But Vereker's intention did not become clear, and the narrator now asks the novelist to state his intention more clearly. There is good reason to assume that the intention can be stated in another way. Vereker would not, after all, be urging the narrator to state an intention that had already been clearly stated. His intention, then, must not be bound by form; it must exist independently of the words on the page. The narrator could, I suppose, have sat down beside Vereker, poured himself a cup of tea, and, beginning on the first page of the first novel, read the whole of Vereker's oeuvre word for word. Slamming the last book shut, he would triumphantly shout "*That* is your general intention!" But this is not the general intention Vereker is looking for.

Although the general intention can be stated in another way, Vereker cannot do it. When the narrator accuses him of expecting critics to articulate a meaning he can't articulate himself, Vereker replies, "Haven't I done it in twenty volumes?" (*FC* 369). The narrator takes this as an evasion: he assumes that Vereker is, for perverse artistic reasons perhaps, withholding his general intention. Three-quarters of the way through the tale the narrator is still considering writing to Vereker and asking him for the general intention (388). But Vereker doesn't know it – at least, not in any *other* way. Vereker's novels constitute the only expression of the general intention he is able to give.

As Wolfgang Iser suggests, the narrator sees the literary work as a kind of puzzle: the author begins with a clear meaning, understandable to anyone, and disguises it through the application of literary form. The reader's job is to tear away this disguise, revealing the clear meaning underneath. The disadvantages of this 'puzzle model' are obvious enough. Under such a model, it is not the work which is of value but the meaning which can be extracted from the work. There is clearly no point in reading the work once the meaning has been extracted, and the only thing for the reader to do is gloat over his own interpretive skill (Iser 4-5). Unless one is fond of puzzles, there is no reason to read the literary work at all, especially in this day and age, when the solution could easily be found on the Internet in about five minutes. Nor can an author who disguises a clear meaning care very much for that meaning or be particularly interested in communicating it.

On the plus side, the puzzle model recognizes that from the author's perspective the literary work consists, as it were, of two levels: the author's *text* represents the author's intended *meaning*. Meaning does not inhere in the words but lies 'behind' them. But this meaning is not in itself clear, as the puzzle model presumes. The transformation of the author's meaning to the author's text is not a process of disguising a clear meaning, but a process of clarifying a meaning far more enigmatic. This meaning is pre-linguistic, and thus has the capacity to include contents of consciousness not easily expressed in language. It is the art and craft of the author *to* express such contents of consciousness in language, and for this reason any understanding of the intended meaning is not limited to a paraphrase of 'what the words mean.' The narrator mistakenly believes that Vereker could provide him with a paraphrase of his general intention. But Vereker's novels are the clearest paraphrase he is able to make. The general intention is a pre-linguistic meaning, and the critic's

mission, should he choose to accept it, is to recover the general intention from the representation of that intention furnished by Vereker's novels.

The narrator and (in the beginning) Corvick demonstrate how this is *not* to be done. Both critics begin the quest for Vereker's general intention with certain preconceptions about what the figure is and how it is to be discovered. These preconceptions constrain the critics' imaginations and are couched in metaphors which illustrate the 'vulgarity' of their brand of literary criticism. The narrator asks Vereker if the figure is "some sort of philosophy" or "some kind of game you're up to with your style" (*FC* 368). In his perusal of the novels, the narrator "picked out each in its order and held it up to the light" (370), as if the figure was hidden *inside* the pages. Corvick projects his quest for the figure in metaphors which are caricatures of his deification of the author ("he had no wish to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice") and the predatory role of the critic (he is determined to "run [Vereker] to earth" and "bring down the animal with his own rifle"; 377).

Although they begin their respective quests with similarly "vulgar" notions, the two critics differ in their interpretive methodologies. In a single paragraph we accompany the narrator's "maddening" quest from its hopeful beginnings to its conclusion that the general intention is "a monstrous *pose*" (*FC* 370). His failure to discover a figure is immediate and decisive: four short sentences into the paragraph his quest has already ended in "a dead loss" (370). The narrator uses the scientific method, beginning with a hypothesis and testing it against the evidence of the text, and suggests that Corvick will take a similar approach: "he would bound off on false scents as I had done – he would clap his hands over new lights and see them blown out by the wind of the turned page" (376). Like the narrator, Corvick and Gwendolen begin their quest in close textual study, but for them the quest is a

game in which playing is more exciting than winning: “There was no hurry, Corvick said – the future was before them and the fascination could only grow; they would take him page by page, as they would take one of the classics, inhale him in slow draughts and let him sink all the way in” (375).

This image of *inhaling* is, as Rachel Salmon says, “an image in which subject and object fuse” (796), and suggests an approach to the text considerably different from the kind of scanning which would suffice if the figure was, as the narrator surmises, “a preference for the letter P” (*FC* 368). Inhaling suggests a re-cognition of the words on the page, an appropriation of those words as one’s own, a *realizing* of those words as ideas or emotions. Through this realization the fiction of the printed page is transformed into the fact of the reader’s actual thoughts and emotions. Scanning is an altogether different kind of cognitive act. The scanner regards the literary work as a visual entity – a verbal icon -- examining it vertically and horizontally, jumping back and forth, performing other maneuvers which interrupt the sequential realization of the words as thoughts and emotions.

Nevertheless, Corvick’s inhaling fails to produce the general intention. Then suddenly, after six months in India, the figure in the carpet appears. Gwendolen reports to the narrator:

> it’s the thing itself, let severely alone for six months, that has simply sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle. 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 elements were all in his mind, and in the *secousse* of a new and intense experience they just struck light. (*FC* 381-2)

Two conclusions can be drawn from this report. First, the discovery of the general intention is not a necessary result of the attempt to find it. In relocating to India, Corvick abandons

the *active search* -- which yielded nothing -- in favor of a *passive reception*. He has recognized that he cannot force himself to understand; having inhaled the novels, all he can do is sit tight and hope. The hunting metaphor which characterized the early stages of his quest now sees its comeuppance: he does not pounce on the figure; it is the figure that pounces on him, "like a tigress out of the jungle" (*FC* 381). The figure cannot be frog-marched out of the carpet, but, as Vereker says, must "dawn on you" (365-6). Corvick's discovery is not the result of conscious cognition but is rather a sudden perception. The figure dawns on him in the same way that the duck or the young woman in the ambiguous drawings suddenly dawn on us after we have been staring at them for several minutes. Just as Corvick cannot force himself to discover the figure, we cannot force ourselves to see the duck or the young woman: "thinking hard will seldom enable one to see an aspect of a figure which he has been previously unable to notice" (Hanson 94).

While he is waiting for the figure in the carpet to emerge, Corvick does not just sit in a chair twiddling his thumbs -- he gets on with his life. The second conclusion implied by Gwendolen's report is that a certain kind of experience is a necessary prerequisite for the discovery of the general intention. James remarks that "it is with the kinds of criticism exactly as it is with the kinds of art -- the best kind, the only kind worth speaking of, is the kind that springs from the liveliest experience" (*Selected* 170). Corvick has a vast reservoir of lively experience to draw on. Unlike the narrator, a bachelor whose sole occupation, as far as we know, is his literary endeavors, Corvick is deeply involved in the social world. When we first meet Corvick, he is so preoccupied with his fiancée and her ailing mother that he has "not even had time to read" Vereker's novel, of which he has promised a review (*FC* 358). Vereker suggests that Corvick's impending marriage may help in his quest for the figure (373); the narrator, who envies "Corvick's possession of a friend who had some

light to mingle with his own" (375), agrees. Corvick seizes every opportunity for new experience. Commenting on his inexperience as a newspaper correspondent, the narrator says "the fact that a particular task was not in his line was apt to be with himself exactly a reason for accepting it" (379). Driving dog-carts is not in Corvick's line, as Corvick himself knows, and his acceptance of that task leads to his death (388-9). For Corvick, literature is more than just books, it is *life*: "He'd call it letters, he'd call it life, but it was all one thing" (374).

So how does Corvick's experience in India lead him to the discovery of the general intention? Did Corvick meet some Bombay swami who had read Vereker's novels and was willing to share his knowledge of the general intention? Or are the novels an allegory of some aspect of Indian history which Corvick knew nothing about until he made his voyage? We don't know, of course; but the connection need not be so explicit. Perhaps Corvick did not need to go to India to discover the general intention, and perhaps he did not need to go anywhere at all. Corvick does not simply *acquire* the general intention as if it were for sale in some remote corner of Bombay; he acquires, through his experiences, a context of knowledge (what reading researchers call a *schema*) within which the general intention no longer needs to be sought but is rather already apparent. This context of knowledge can *only* be acquired through experience, and the general intention can only be discovered if one possesses that context of knowledge. Like many critics, the narrator mistakenly believes that he possesses all the contexts of knowledge necessary for the comprehension of all literary intentions, and so his failure to perceive Vereker's intention can only be a clerical error. But all readers do not share the same contexts of knowledge. Contexts of knowledge are only acquired through experience, and there is no way to know what context of knowledge, if any, a particular experience will produce. All Corvick

required was six months in India. For the narrator, it may require losing a limb, going to war or falling in love. This may strike some people as a rather exclusive approach to literary interpretation. And it is exclusive, if one insists that *this* meaning is the one and only meaning of the text. It is certainly no more exclusive than claiming that you cannot know what it feels like to fall in love if you yourself have never fallen in love. According to Robert Scholes,

> Many literary works assume experience of life as an aspect of their context shared by writer and reader. Some works refuse to open to us until we are sufficiently mature. Others close as we lose access to some contexts through growing or forgetting ... For those who have experienced such things as marriage or bereavement the words themselves will signify something different than they will for those who have had no experience of these things – and much of literature is based on attempts to generate semiotic equivalents for experiences that seem to defy duplication in mere signs. (35)

In this light, interpretive disagreements are due partly to the fact that certain meanings are only available to certain readers. If Vereker's general intention is 'about' marriage, for example (there is, in fact, reason to believe that it is), then it may be that only those with first-hand experience of marriage will be able to discover it. As Scholes suggests, however, just as contexts of knowledge are grown into, they may also be grown out of. This is particularly important, because it challenges the popular belief that an older or more educated reader is necessarily better equipped to understand literature. But just as a ten-year-old may lack the experience to understand what an author means by the word 'bereavement,' so may a sixty-year-old forget what it feels like to be a disillusioned teenager, and so fail to understand Salinger's intention in *The Catcher in the Rye.*

But is the meaning that Corvick discovers in India really the same thing as Vereker's general intention? I stated earlier that an author's meaning is pre-linguistic, and as such can include subjective contents of consciousness such as the author's emotions and

the private associations she attaches to words. If so, it would seem to be impossible for Corvick to recover the same meaning that Vereker originally intended to convey. Even if he could, he could never know that he had done so. Hirsch says that "Since we cannot get inside the author's head, it is useless to fret about an intention that cannot be observed" (*Validity* 16), and for this reason he specifies his definition of meaning as *verbal meaning*. The author's verbal meaning must be sharable, and in order to be sharable it must "fall within known conventions" (*Validity* 66-7). This is functional enough as a definition, but it suggests some very serious consequences. To whom are these conventions known? Must they be universal conventions, or does it suffice that most literary critics are aware of them? If Corvick's discovery proves the sharability of the general intention, it only proves the sharability of the general intention *to Corvick*. The conventions (or contexts of knowledge) on which Corvick's discovery depend do not appear to be universal or even generally known among literary critics: he only acquires them as the result of his "new and intense experience" in India. My question is this: should Vereker's intention count as the objective *meaning* of his novels, when the discovery of that intention requires a knowledge of conventions so arcane that even an exceptional critic like Corvick has to fly halfway around the world in order to acquire it? By Hirsch's logic, as long as the critics are unable to discover Vereker's intention, that intention is not sharable (i.e., it has never been shared) and does not qualify as the meaning of the novels. When Corvick discovers the intention, however, the intention suddenly 'becomes' sharable, and every reader in the world but Corvick and Vereker is excluded from the objective meaning of Vereker's novels. To put it in evaluative terms, prior to Corvick's discovery, Vereker's novels are bad novels insofar as we assume that he has ineptly expressed his intention. When Corvick discovers the

intention, he proves that Vereker has succeeded in expressing it. The novels become good novels, and the ineptitude falls to every reader but Corvick and Vereker.

If the conventions Hirsch speaks of need only be shared by the community of literary critics (or even by the community of arbitrarily-determined 'competent' readers), then all readers who, through no fault of their own, have not acquired a knowledge of those conventions are excluded from the discovery of the meaning of a literary work. They may enjoy the work, but it is impossible for them to know what it *means*. Nor can they do anything to better their situation. While a knowledge of the conventions may certainly be acquired, it may not necessarily be acquired *at will*, as the case of Corvick shows, and in fact may never be acquired, even by the most diligent reader, as in the case of the narrator. On the other hand, if the conventions are universal, then the author is restricted in the kinds of meanings he may produce. In order for the author's intention to be considered the meaning of the literary work, that intention must be a kind of lowest common denominator of meaning, something that all readers, of all ages and backgrounds, can potentially understand. This suggestion is clearly ludicrous. What the ten-year-old constructs as the verbal meaning of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* would almost certainly be incommensurate with Nietzsche's intention, and it is preposterous to limit the verbal meaning of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to what the ten-year-old can understand. I use the ten-year-old to make a point, of course. The reader may be a forty-year-old philosopher or a sixty-year-old rocket scientist and still fail to understand Nietzsche's intention.

Even an agreement about Nietzsche's intention may be a far cry from Nietzsche's intention. For Hirsch, the aim of interpretation is not certainty about the author's intention but rather a determination about what the author *probably* meant. But if it is *not* what the author meant, the word 'probably' is meaningless -- as the saying goes, 'almost' only

counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. If Hirsch's aim is to preserve the possibility of objective knowledge, then an agreement about the meaning would in fact be a feasible aim for interpretation: we can objectively know what we have agreed to call the meaning of the work. But this is objective knowledge only of an agreement; it in no way constitutes objective knowledge of the author's intention. The reader will recall that the attempt to determine an objective *fabula* from the evidence in the *sjužet* was my complaint with Shlomith Rimmon's theory of ambiguity. We cannot know that the ghosts in "The Turn of the Screw" exist; we can only know that the governess *sees* them. We cannot know that there is a figure in Vereker's carpet, we can only know that Vereker and Corvick *say* there is one.

If we are determined to strive for objective knowledge in literary interpretation, it may be more feasible to simply agree on what the meaning of a literary work will henceforth be than to claim that this meaning is 'probably' what the author intended. Personally, I am unwilling to sacrifice my own understanding of any literary work for the sake of being in agreement with a community of readers. And yet, it is still possible for me to attain a certain diluted objectivity. I simply take as my interpretive goal not the objective knowledge of a universal absolute, but rather an 'objective' knowledge of my own subjective perception. If I cannot know with certainty what a literary work means, I can at least know what I understand it to mean.

And yet even in this certainty we can be mistaken. Under close inspection of "The Figure in the Carpet" we see how much we take for granted, how much we have presumed about the narrative. Despite the fact that James gives us no proof of the existence of the figure in the carpet, it is difficult, at least on the first reading, not to take its existence for granted, simply because we do not normally presume that the characters in a literary work

are lying unless we have good reason to do so. I refer the reader to the plot summary at the beginning of this chapter. Although I tried to present as objective a summary of James's tale as possible, my presumption that I knew what I did not know is, in retrospect, strikingly evident. How, for example, do I know that Vereker is unaware that the narrator is the author of the review? How do I know that Vereker confirms Corvick's discovery? How do I know that Deane knows nothing about the figure in the carpet? For that matter, how do I know that Corvick is killed in a dog-cart or that the narrator is really a literary critic? I do not know. But I *believe*, and the one thing I can say with certainty is that I know I believe.

Before we follow Corvick on the next stage of his adventure, let us consider how the reader's understanding of a literary work is expressed in language. The bi-level model of the literary work I discussed earlier (the author's pre-linguistic *meaning* that lies behind the author's written *text*) can be recast as a description of the reader's – or, more exactly, the critic's – interpretation of the literary work. Hirsch distinguishes between the processes of *understanding*, or the reader's construction of the meaning of a text, and *interpretation*, which is the explanation of that meaning (*Validity* 129). I prefer to reserve 'interpretation' to indicate a variety of acts, not limited to what the reader does, and will therefore substitute it with the word *articulation* to denote any verbal or written explanation of the reader's understanding. Understanding is a pre-linguistic construction of meaning, and consequently can encompass a wide range of meaning before that meaning is constrained by language in the exigencies of articulation. The process of articulating a pre-linguistic complex of meaning is similar, if not identical, to what the author does when she transforms her meaning into a text. The author begins with a complex of meaning, an *understanding*, which she expresses in a text, or *articulation*.

Having discovered the general intention, Corvick must now confirm his discovery with Vereker. To do this, he must first communicate his discovery. How this is done is not especially important; he can communicate it in words, in bodily gestures, a facial expression, or telepathically. I do, however, disagree with those critics (Iser, Salmon, Williams) who claim that the general intention *cannot* be communicated in words. After all, Vereker has communicated it in words; if the general intention is a pre-linguistic complex of meaning, then the same options for linguistic communication that Vereker employs are in theory available to Corvick. In Iser's reading, meaning is an effect, and Corvick is unable to translate the *effect* of the general intention into an *explanation*: "After he has experienced the meaning of Vereker's novel [*sic*], his life is changed. But all he can do is report this extraordinary change – he cannot explain or convey the meaning as the critic seeks to do" (10). But Corvick *does* convey the meaning – first to Vereker, then to Gwendolen. I find it difficult to accept that the mere report of a change, without any description of the cause of that change, would have satisfied either Vereker's or Gwendolen's standards for proof. For years Vereker trolled the literary papers for just such a proof. Gwendolen becomes so extraordinarily changed herself that she will speak of her knowledge of the figure as "my *life*" (*FC* 392) – could the mere report of a change do *that*? If Corvick conveyed the general intention through some non-linguistic form, he at least believed that it was possible to convey it linguistically, as he planned to write "a great last word on Vereker's writings," an "exhaustive study" which would "utter ... the unimagined truth" (*FC* 387).

When Iser says that Corvick cannot "explain or convey" the general intention, he is expressing an aversion to a "single referential meaning" (8), a paraphrase, the kind of explanation of the novels that the narrator is looking for. But to convey a meaning does not necessarily imply a reduction to referential language. The concept of referential language

presumably became a necessity as critics realized that, although the meaning of a literary work can never be delivered in neat linguistic formulations or messages (such as the 'moral of the story' in Aesop's fables), language is nevertheless the medium in which that meaning is delivered. Referential language was thus distinguished from other kinds of language: I. A. Richards says that a "statement may be used for the sake of the *reference*, true or false, which it causes. This is the *scientific* use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the *emotive* use of language" (*Principles* 211).

Richards' use of these terms is geared towards poetry, but the distinction is equally applicable to the prose narrative, being roughly analogous to the traditional distinction between *showing* and *telling*. To hazard an example: an author is writing a novel in which she intends to convey the sense of a suicidal depression triggered by terminal illness. Every formal device, every literary technique, will minister to that effect. She may choose to write in the form of daily journal entries to emphasize the passage of time and the steady approach of death. These entries may become progressively shorter as the narrator loses the strength to write. There may be few characters and little dialogue in order to create an atmosphere of isolation, to which the cadence of the prose, the diction, the images and metaphors will contribute. And all of this may be done without the use of the words "suicidal" or "depression" (in fact, to suggest that those words convey the author's intention is already to reduce that intention to referential language, and my need for them illustrates the dilemma of the critic). What paraphrase could convey the total effect of such a novel, if the novel itself did not make it clear? For the author to substitute the novel with the words "What I mean to convey is a sense of suicidal depression" is to drastically limit, or at the very least to alter, the intended meaning.

The distinction between the two types of language is equally important for the critic, who faces a dilemma when confronted with the need to articulate her understanding. The above example may suggest that the critic's only options are either to hopelessly reduce the meaning or to simply repeat the words of the text. Tzvetan Todorov offers some alternatives:

> No doubt there is an *untheorizable* element in literature, as Michel Deguy calls it, if theory presupposes scientific language. One function of literature is the subversion of this very language; hence it is extremely rash to claim we can read it exhaustively with the help of that very language it calls into question. To do so is equivalent to postulating the failure of literature. At the same time, this dilemma is much too inclusive for us to be able to escape it: confronted with a poem, we can only resign ourselves to the impoverishment caused by a different language, or else (a factitious solution) write another poem. Factitious because this second text will be a new work which still awaits its reading: an entire autonomy deprives criticism of its raison d'être, just as a submission to ordinary language affects it with a certain sterility. There remains, of course, a third solution which is silence: we cannot speak of that. (246)

It is this third solution that Iser invokes when he says that "Meaning as effect is a perplexing phenomenon, and such perplexity cannot be removed by explanations – on the contrary, it invalidates them" (10). But Vereker does not feel that his own explanation is invalidated by his experience of meaning; in fact, he considers his "application" of his general intention to be "a triumph" (*FC* 366). Neither does he feel that the critic's explanation will compromise his general intention – as long as it is an explanation of *the* general intention. It is he who instigates the quest, and he is apparently delighted with Corvick's discovery. The critic has an obligation and an ability over and above that of the general reader: "the critic just *isn't* a plain man" (*FC* 367), Vereker says; critics are "little demons of subtlety" (367) whose job is to look for, find, and report the author's intentions. There is, perhaps, a way in which Vereker's entire oeuvre could be boiled down into a one-page critical summary, and Vereker might be tempted to try if he thought he could do it.

But he can only articulate his intention in emotive language, and at one point laments, "if I were only, pen in hand, one of *you* chaps!" (369). In drawing the distinction between the novelist's job and the critic's, Vereker is echoed by Gwendolen, who is also a novelist: "I don't "review[...]" ... I'm reviewed!" (393).

In Iser's defense, several characters do have difficulty articulating their understandings of Vereker's work. Vereker himself, having fully expressed his general intention in emotive language, is stumped when he tries to describe it in referential language: "By my little point I mean – what shall I call it?" (*FC* 365). Corvick, in reference to his original, pre-discovery understanding of the novels, declares that Vereker "gives me a pleasure so rare; the sense of' – he mused a little – 'something or other" (359). Although he cannot say what Vereker's novels mean, he knows they mean something: "What he would have said, had he reviewed the new book, was that there was evidently in the writer's inmost art something to *be* understood" (371). Corvick's initial experience of the meaning of Vereker's novels is as a certain *je ne sais quoi*, a sense of meaningfulness, and his description of this sense of meaningfulness is sensual and non-linguistic: "he had caught whiffs and hints of he didn't know what, faint wandering notes of a distant music" (376).

Lady Jane also understands a meaning (not the general intention) which she cannot express in words, but manages to communicate in symbolic form: "Lady Jane threw into her eyes a look evidently intended to give an idea of what she always felt; but she added that she couldn't have expressed it" (*FC* 361). She adds, however, that in his review the narrator "expressed it in a striking manner" (361). Her inability to express this understanding in language makes it no less meaningful to her. Roughly equivalent to the narrator's understanding, Lady Jane's understanding may be only "the usual twaddle", but it is nevertheless an understanding that has been found in Vereker's work. There is no real

need for her to be able to express it in language: *she* is no critic. Although Lady Jane's understanding is ineffable, it is only ineffable *for her*. Ineffability is not a property of meaning, as Iser argues. It is simply a particular reader's inability to articulate her understanding in language.

Although he has discovered the general intention and somehow conveyed his discovery to Vereker and Gwendolen, Corvick has the additional responsibility of the critic to cogently and intelligibly articulate his understanding to the reading public. Peter Halter suggests that "the real moment of truth is the one in which he has to *name* the secret he has discovered" (36). Whether or not Corvick could have named the secret, that moment of truth is pre-empted by his accidental death. It may be that the narrator, rather than Corvick, is the only successful critic in the tale. If the critic's job is merely to discover intentions, then Corvick is indeed the "victor"; but if the critic's job is to articulate her own understanding in the public press, then it is the narrator who must be crowned "with the critical laurel" (*FC* 377). The narrator considers himself a failure because he cannot discover the general intention, but he doesn't doubt that he has correctly ascertained Vereker's "subordinate intentions" (370). Critics such as Iser attack the narrow type of meaning the narrator proceeds to search for *after* he learns of the general intention. But his understanding of the novels *prior to* his first encounter with Vereker is not necessarily narrow – it could in fact be *his* life; we are never told what his review consists of. Until Vereker dismisses his review, the narrator believes that he has successfully articulated the meaning of Vereker's novel. His review has the added advantage of articulating a sharable understanding, as he speaks not only for his own understanding but for Lady Jane's as well.

In this light, "The Figure in the Carpet" neither defends nor indicts the search for an author's intention. Vereker's figure is a double-edged sword: for the critic who is able to

discover it, the novels are “an experience quite apart” (385). But for the critic who is not able to discover it, “Instead of being a pleasure the more they became a resource the less” (370). One wonders if the critics would be so inclined to dismiss the narrator as a “Philistine” (Iser 4), regardless of his methodology, had his methodology succeeded in producing the general intention. The critics generally regard the narrator as a schmuck. What I am suggesting here is that, when we regard the reader as the source of the meaning of the literary work, the narrator’s ‘incorrect’ understanding of Vereker’s novels is just as valid as Corvick’s ‘correct’ one.

Of course, the narrator sees *himself* as a failure. But if he is, he is not entirely to blame. In writing his review for *The Middle* the narrator has merely obeyed Vereker’s injunction in advance: “I do it in my way ... Go *you* and don’t do it in yours” (*FC* 369). The narrator already *has* done it in his way, and Vereker has, rather hypocritically, rejected his way as “the usual twaddle”. A certain duplicity characterizes Vereker’s intercourse with the narrator. The descriptions Vereker offers not only do not make the general intention “very distinct” (365) but are in fact a bunch of mixed clues. His metaphors oscillate between the self-deprecating and the grandiose: the general intention is both a “little point” (364) and “the part of the business in which...the flame of art burns most intensely” (365), a “little trick” (366) and the “loveliest thing in the world” (369). As the narrator observes, Vereker is “a man of unstable moods” (373), first inviting the narrator to look for the general intention, then admonishing him to give it up, and later regretting having told him in the first place. Whatever his reasons for these shifts, it is hardly surprising that the narrator comes to the conclusion that “so far as the subject of the tip went, there wasn’t much in it” (373). Vereker seems to have neither full cognizance of his own mind nor any principled stance on the matter of authorial intention. He wants his intention to be discovered

independently, but can't resist revealing his secret to the first critic to show "a spice of intelligence" (364). At their second meeting, Vereker again tells the narrator to give up the quest, on the grounds of "having saddled [him] with a knowledge that [he] may find something of a burden" (372). His ostensible reason for this retraction is that he doesn't want to give the critics the "tip"; but perhaps he has come to regard his own intention as irrelevant, and potentially harmful, to the narrator's understanding. The narrator's mistake is not that his understanding of the novels is wrong; his mistake is that he defers to Vereker's authority and sacrifices a meaningful understanding of the novels, when even the author is not sure that his authority ought to be deferred to.

But let us return to Corvick. Although we do not know how Corvick communicates his discovery to Vereker, there is no *a priori* reason that he cannot articulate it in language. Let us assume that he does so. In order to confirm that Corvick has discovered *the* intention, Vereker must recognize some evidence of it in Corvick's articulation. According to Fish, whenever we articulate an understanding we substitute "for our immediate linguistic experience an interpretation or abstraction of it, in which "it" is inevitably compromised" (32). If so, Corvick's articulation is a compromise of his understanding (and, by the same token, Vereker's novels are a compromise of his general intention), but no more so than the utterance "chair" is a compromise of one's sensory experience of a chair. The utterance "chair" is a reduction to referential language of the phenomenal object – it does not contain all the perceived 'chairness' -- but it is nevertheless possible to recognize from the utterance that a particular type of phenomenal object is being referred to. In the same way, any articulation is a compromise of the understanding it seeks to articulate. But the articulation does not have to *contain* the understanding in its entirety (it never does); it simply has to furnish evidence that a particular understanding has been

achieved. Vereker recognizes from Corvick's articulation that this understanding has been achieved, just as Corvick recognizes Vereker's understanding from his novels. It is now Corvick's text that awaits interpretation, and Vereker has to go through the same process of interpretation that Corvick went through. This process is naturally much easier for Vereker, as he already possesses the relevant contexts of knowledge, and furthermore already knows what he is looking for (in terms of the Magic Eye metaphor, he already knows how to look at the poster and what the image looks like). There is no distinctive earmark by which Vereker recognizes that Corvick is correct – as Gwendolen surmises, you simply know it when you see it (*FC* 381).

But how does Vereker confirm that Corvick has indeed discovered the general intention, when I claimed earlier that it is impossible for the reader to have exactly the same understanding as the author? The simple answer is that Corvick and Vereker do not need to have *exactly* the same experience. The general intention is not only general in that it runs through the whole of Vereker's oeuvre; it is also general in the sense that it is not specific. This lack of specificity allows Vereker to recognize in Corvick's articulation the evidence of an understanding that coincides with his general intention, while not being equal to it. A model for this generality of intention is suggested by Hirsch's definition of verbal meaning as a *type*: "A type is an entity with two decisive characteristics. First, it is an entity that has a boundary by virtue of which something belongs to it or does not ... The second decisive characteristic of a type is that it can always be represented by more than one instance" (*Validity* 49-50). A type functions like an *et cetera*: the author intends a set of meanings, but he is only conscious of some of the meanings included in that set. As Hirsch says, "it is only through this concept [of type] that verbal meaning can be (as it is) a determinate object of consciousness and yet transcend (as it does) the actual contents of consciousness"

(*Validity* 49). Vereker, perhaps, is only conscious of a single intention *A*, or rather a single *experience A*, which he articulated in his novels. Because it is impossible for two people to have exactly the same experience, Corvick is not able to recognize the novels as a representation of *A*. But his reading of the novels produces experience *D*; and, although Vereker did not have that particular experience *D*, he recognizes that *D* is included in his type. Vereker's novels represent two unique experiences within the same type. A man who is suicidally depressed over a market crash may understand a meaning which falls within the same type of the general intention of the terminally-ill author, and yet their understandings are obviously not the same.

Having argued for the possibility of the existence, discovery, articulation and confirmation of Vereker's general intention, I would like to consider the major argument against it. I concluded earlier in this chapter that "The Figure in the Carpet" is not ambiguous in the definition proposed by Rimmon because the ambiguity, rather than being a choice between two mutually exclusive *fabulas*, is already present to the narrator in the *sjužet*. We therefore can neither choose between the two *fabulas*, nor refuse to choose between them. There is no choice: the tale provides no objective proof of the general intention. Any interpretation is simply the reader's subjective *belief* about whether or not that intention exists. Challenging "the prevalent tendency in James criticism to identify all ambiguity with the problem of the reliability or unreliability of the narrator", Rimmon claims that the ambiguity in "The Figure in the Carpet" is due rather to the unreliability of Corvick and Vereker (101-2). Usually, a character's unreliability is due to the presence of some kind of unreliability marker, such as a suspicious feature in a character's discourse (as in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart") or some gross discrepancy between a character's assertions and other evidence furnished by the narrative. Nothing of this sort marks either Corvick or

Vereker. What Rimmon calls their unreliability is entirely circumstantial, being due to the fact that the narrator (and hence the reader) receives no proof of their claims, and to the fact that to both Corvick and Vereker a fairly feasible motive for dissimulation can be imputed. The narrator, on the other hand, is marked as being to some extent unreliable, both by a certain emotional immaturity and by a tendency toward misinterpretation which extends beyond his 'misinterpretation' of Vereker's works.

According to Rimmon, it is not the narrator's claims which are called into question; he rather serves as a touchstone for the validity of the claims of Corvick and Vereker (102). It is precisely as a touchstone, however, that his reliability is called into question. Although the narrator cannot prove that Corvick and Vereker are telling the truth, he *believes* them. He has a perfect motive to disbelieve, in that his disbelief in the general intention would justify his failure to discover it; and he does disbelieve for a time. But despite the lack of proof and the motive for disbelief, at the end of the tale he is fully convinced of the existence of the figure and Corvick's discovery of it. Why? He doesn't tell us. But the narrator has more evidence on which to base his belief than the reader has. Apart from the narrator's assessment of Corvick and Vereker (which is precisely what is called into question), the reader has only their spoken statements by which to determine if they are reliable. The narrator, however, can see them and hear them. He has not only their words but also their tone of voice, inflections, facial expressions and bodily gestures – in short, all those things by which we judge the truthfulness of a statement.[5] Moreover, Corvick is the narrator's "best friend" (*FC* 389): isn't the narrator in a better position than the reader to judge if Corvick is telling the truth or not? He does briefly suspect Corvick of lying when Corvick and Gwendolen give conflicting accounts of their engagement, but adds that "I felt Corvick's to be the one I least doubted" (385). He has a good reason to suspect that one of

them is lying, and the very fact that he does suspect them shows that he is not utterly naive. He apparently does not have as good a reason to doubt Corvick about the discovery of the general intention. He continues to believe that Corvick, Vereker, Gwendolen and Deane are all telling the truth. As readers, we rely on the narrator to be our eyes and ears, and he reports impressions based on evidence that we do not have. His reliability is thus called very much into question. If he is unreliable, then his impressions of those characters are unreliable, and consequently the existence of the figure is called into question.

From the opening sentence a certain amount of arrogance, bitterness, and cynicism seep through and set the tone of his narration: "I had done a few things and earned a few pence – I had perhaps even had time to begin to think I was finer than was perceived by the patronising" (*FC* 357). From that point on, the narrator proceeds to say any number of unpleasant things. When he is called to the bedside of his grievously ill brother, he declares that "what was uppermost in my mind during several anxious weeks was the sense that if we had only been in Paris I might have run over to see Corvick" (386). Having failed to name the general intention in his review, he takes consolation in the fact that Corvick too is "out of it" (363), and later finds "revenge" in Deane's obsession (400). He hits his ethical nadir when Gwendolen steadfastly refuses to divulge the figure, and he wonders, in all seriousness, "if I should have to marry Mrs Corvick to get what I wanted" (391).

The narrator also seems to have made a poor impression on the members of his social circle. Corvick holds the narrator's critical abilities in low esteem, and in his capacity as editor at *The Middle* has relegated the narrator to dealing "mainly with the ladies and the minor poets" (*FC* 357). Corvick alternately accuses the narrator of being "silly" (358), "vulgar" and "spiteful" (371), and reports that Gwendolen was "chilled" by the narrator's reluctance to share the details of his conversation with Vereker (375). Gwendolen later

accuses him of insulting her dead husband (392). Even Lady Jane is disappointed to find that the narrator is the author of the review which so aptly expresses her feelings about Vereker's novels: the narrator supposes that "If the author was 'only me' the thing didn't seem quite so remarkable" (361).

But the other characters' assessments of the narrator must themselves be assessed. Vereker, too, paints a largely unflattering portrait of the narrator, but like his oscillating descriptions of the general intention this portrait is a largely duplicitous one. He dismisses the narrator's review as "the usual twaddle" (*FC* 362), but soon comments on the "spice of intelligence" and "exceptional sharpness" of that same review (364). He calls the narrator "awfully clever" (365) but then refers to his critical categories as "cheap journalese" (367). All this conflicting evidence must be sifted and weighed by the narrator, and his interpretation of what Vereker thinks of him tells us more than Vereker's remarks themselves do. From these mixed messages the narrator concludes that Vereker "evidently didn't think me intellectually equipped for the adventure" (373). Is this conclusion really Vereker's view of the narrator, or is it merely the narrator's view of Vereker's view of the narrator? If the former, then the narrator's reliability as an interpreter of Vereker's novels is cast into doubt, while his reliability as an interpreter of Vereker is validated. If the latter, then Vereker may in fact think him "intellectually equipped" to discover the general intention.

By themselves, the narrator's interpretations are not sufficient proof of his reliability or unreliability, as we have no way of knowing if these interpretations are correct or not. He may strike us as a cynic for his tendency to attribute cynical motives to others. About Gwendolen, whom he has never met, he says "I had my ideas, which were mainly to the effect that Corvick would marry her if her mother would only die" (*FC* 358). He attributes

Vereker's "usual twaddle" remark to the fact that his laudatory review "should have had a reserve or two" (363). When Corvick, his quest proving fruitless, stops discussing the general intention with him, the narrator says that "from his silence ... I had drawn a sharp conclusion. His courage had dropped ... he couldn't face the triumph with which I might have greeted an explicit admission" (380). But do these interpretations characterize the narrator as a cynic, or as a remarkably perspicacious observer who is quick to recognize the cynical motives of others? We are rarely in a position to determine if the narrator is interpreting correctly or not, because we have nothing objective to compare his interpretations to: the tale is one long subjective interpretation.

Ultimately, the narrator is the best judge of his own reliability. There are, in fact, two narrators: "The Figure in the Carpet" is a reminiscence by an older narrator who reports the experiences of a younger narrator who participates in the action of the story. Borrowing terms used by Wayne C. Booth, I will call the older narrator the *observer*, the younger the *narrator-agent* (153-4). The observer demonstrates a remarkable perspicacity in his retrospective 'corrections' of the narrator-agent's 'misinterpretations.' I place these words in inverted commas because ultimately we do not know if he is righting wrong interpretations or wronging right ones. There is reason to put more trust in the observer, however, for in the interim between the events and their transcription the narrator seems to have grown more mature and reflective. This does not make the observer wholly reliable, as he himself admits: "I'm as much in the dark as ever, though I've grown used in a sense to my obtuseness" (*FC* 365). Through this split narrator, James is able to register both the full import of events as they originally appeared to the narrator-agent as well as the retrospective corrections of the observer. When his attempt to find the figure fails, the observer says: "I accounted for my confusion – perversely, I allow – by the idea that

Vereker had made a fool of me" (*FC* 370). In this sentence, the observer manages to interpolate the "perversely" without undermining the effect of the narrator-agent's original interpretation. The apology has been tendered, but the damage is still done: it is the narrator-agent's interpretation ("Vereker had made a fool of me") that lingers in the mind of the reader.

The observer admits that the narrator-agent has (or had) a tendency to 'read into' the words of the other characters when their intended meaning is less than explicit. Regarding the sudden termination of Corvick's engagement, the observer says, "What I took the liberty of more closely inferring was that the girl might in some way have estranged him" (*FC* 379). Gwendolen is particularly unresponsive to his pleas for information: "She didn't say, but I took the liberty of reading into her words"; "I read some singular things into Gwendolen's words and some still more extraordinary ones into her silences" (388). He mentions "other things I couldn't help believing, or at least imagining" (390) and "my false view of the poor man's attitude" (399). These corrections are not without a note of remorse. It is the narrator-agent who feels that Corvick's and Gwendolen's fascination with the general intention "was irritating and quite envenomed my doubts", but the observer is quick to add, "That statement looks unamiable, and what probably happened was that I felt humiliated at seeing other persons deeply beguiled by an experiment that had brought me only chagrin" (375).

However, there are at least two occasions in which the narrator-agent's interpretations are contradicted by 'objective' evidence. These misinterpretations escape the notice of the observer. When Gwendolen suggests that the general intention proved too "immense" for Corvick to send in a letter, the narrator recalls that "Vereker's own statement to me was exactly that the "figure" *would* fit into a letter" (*FC* 382). But Vereker

did not say this. Vereker's reply, when the narrator asks him if he would be able to clearly state his general intention, is "Haven't I done it in twenty volumes?" (369). This is not so much a lapse of memory as it is a misinterpretation of the intended meaning of Vereker's reply. The narrator can see no alternative to the referentiality of the general intention; he takes it so much for granted that the general intention *can* be stated clearly that he misses the implications of Vereker's reply and reads in his own predetermined meaning. A second occasion is the narrator-agent's interpretation of Corvick's telegram: "It had for some persons the opposite effect, but his message may fairly be paraphrased. 'Have patience; I want to see, as it breaks on you, the face you'll make!' 'Tellement envie de voir ta tête!' – that was what I had to sit down with" (383). Other, more literal translations of the telegram suggest that Corvick may indeed have intended his telegram to convey the opposite effect of the narrator's paraphrase. Bromwich and Hollander translate it as "I'd so love to see your face!" (947), while Kermode translates it as "I long to see your face" (453). The narrator paraphrases his own unflagging preoccupation into a message that is, as the French suggests, a simple desire for reunion.

These acts of 'reading in,' these interpretations which may or may not be *mis*interpretations, are simulacra of the interpretive gestures the reader performs in the process of making sense of the narrative. Because no proof of the general intention exists, the reader is required to project intentions onto the characters in order to substantiate her belief or disbelief in the general intention. It is only because I project an intention onto Corvick's telegram that I am able to claim that the narrator misinterprets it. In the end, there is reason both to believe the narrator and to disbelieve him, and the reader makes this decision in the same way that the narrator makes his decision to believe Corvick and Vereker. Although the narrator has reason both to believe and to disbelieve them, he

believes them; they apparently strike him as believable. In the same way, the narrator's reliability (or Corvick's, or Vereker's) will depend on how he strikes the reader. The term 'reliability' is of limited use here; it joins the ranks of other terms like "protagonist" (Booth 346) and "point of view" (Bellei 98-108) which have been suggested as terms of limited use for the discussion of James's works. The question *Is this character reliable?* begs a further question: *Who does this character appear reliable to?* It is *that* person, be it another character or a reader, whose reliability as a judge of reliability remains to be judged.

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[1] Of course, what Todorov is looking for is not the 'meaning' of James's tales *per se*, but rather a structural constant which can only be found "by superimposing the various works ... by reading them as if in transparency, one on top of the other" (Todorov 144-5). If this is an exercise in reductionism, it is an exercise James himself performed. In an early essay entitled "The Novels of George Eliot", James declared that "The critic's first duty in the face of an author's collective works is to seek out some key to his method, some utterance of his literary convictions, some indication of his ruling theory" (*LC1* 912). James suggests two such keys to Eliot's method, in that her "sympathies are with the common people" (913) and that in all her major characters "passion proves itself feebler than conscience" (915). This may seem to justify Todorov's experiment, although neither the figure that Todorov finds in James nor the one James finds in Eliot may strike the reader as the type of thing she thinks of as the 'meaning' of a literary work.

[2] Rimmon is here using "contradictory" to refer to the two mutually exclusive "finalized" hypotheses; "contrary" refers to the possible variations on each of the two contradictory hypotheses (9).

[3] In Rimmon's definition, the *sjužet* is a prelinguistic presentation of the *fabula*. She uses the term "discourse" for the manifestation, in language, of the *sjužet*. "Discourse" is reserved for her discussion of verbal, as opposed to narrative, ambiguity, and so does not concern us here.

[4] Although not the first to suggest the 'hallucination theory,' Edmund Wilson's essay "The Ambiguity of Henry James" (1934), a Freudian reading of the tale which presented the governess as a victim of sexual repression, was enormously influential (James and Beidler 130-1).

[5] "The Figure in the Carpet" was written shortly after the end of James's ill-fated excursion into dramaturgy, and James strove to make sure that the lessons he had learned by writing for the stage would not be wasted in his fiction (Kaplan 415). Just as the words in a play script are given much of their meaning by the actors who perform them, James's dialogue often requires the reader to 'act out' the parts of his characters in order to determine the meaning of the words on the page. There is perhaps no better example of this than Miles's cry at the end of "The Turn of the Screw": "Peter Quint – you devil!" (*Stories* 740). The vocal inflection and blocking that the reader imaginatively provides for this line will do much to determine if it is Quint whom Miles addresses as a devil, or the governess.

CHAPTER 2

ALL WORK AND NO TEXT MAKE JACK A DULL BOY

As we saw in Chapter 1, the meaning of James's "The Figure in the Carpet" is to a large extent predetermined by the reader's definition of 'meaning.' Depending on which definition they championed, the critics surveyed saw the tale either as an indictment of the obsessive quest for an author's intention, as the celebration of an ineffable experience of meaning, or as a wholly ambiguous narrative whose meaning can only rest in the impossibility of determining what 'really happens.' I concluded that the tale does not implicitly vindicate or indict any of the characters or their respective interpretive approaches, but rather, depending on the reader's critical perspective, can be seen to vindicate or indict any one of them.

This conclusion, of course, is largely predetermined by my decision to use the tale as an illustration of the battle for supremacy between the three poles of author, text, and reader; and, as Stanley Fish argues, this distinction between these three poles is finally specious. The debate between the three poles of meaning presupposes three discrete categories which, rather than existing prior to and independently of interpretation, are in fact the products of interpretation (16-7). The notion of three discrete categories falsely suggests that the reader, explicitly or implicitly, chooses between them in the process of determining the meaning of a work. Readers do not *choose* to understand a work in a particular way -- they simply understand it. Even Corvick, an ardent intentionalist, does not choose how he will understand the novels. Corvick is an experienced critic, and if what he was looking for was *a* meaning, he could have simply elaborated one of his hypotheses into a cohesive and credible explanation of Vereker's novels. He could have done this with not

just one hypothesis but with any number of them. What Corvick is searching for, however, is *the* meaning, and when he finds it this meaning is not a choice but an inevitability. Although he chooses Vereker's intention as the thing to *look for*, the meaning he *finds* is not determined by Vereker's intention: Corvick is sure of his discovery even before Vereker confirms it. The reason he is so sure is that, once he discovers it, the general intention is obvious: "Nothing, in especial, once you were face to face with it, could show for more consummately *done*. When once it came out it came out, was there with a splendour that made you ashamed; and there hadn't been ... the smallest reason why it should have been overlooked" (*FC* 384-5).

But the narrator and Lady Jane arrive at understandings which, to them, are just as obvious. This, Fish suggests, is due to the seemingly paradoxical fact that a text may have more than one literal meaning (268-92). The reader always approaches the text with certain presuppositions about its purposes and concerns, and within those presuppositions the meaning of the work appears obvious. Not all readers begin with the same presuppositions, however, and so the word 'literal,' rather than referring to any single, absolute meaning, refers to the variety of single meanings the text has for a variety of readers. "There always is a literal meaning because in any situation there is always a meaning that seems obvious in the sense that it is there independently of anything we might do. *But that only means that we have already done it,* and in another situation, when we have already done something else, there will be another obvious, that is, literal, meaning" (276).

The key word here is *already*. One point of disagreement between Fish and E.D. Hirsch is the matter of *when* the meaning of a text is determined. Hirsch divides the process of interpretation into two stages or "moments": the *divinatory* moment is "unmethodical, intuitive, sympathetic; it is an imaginative guess without which nothing can begin." The

critical moment submits the divinatory moment "to a "high intellectual standard" by testing it against all the relevant knowledge available" (*Validity* x). The function of the divinatory moment is to produce an understanding, while the function of the critical moment is to bring this understanding into agreement with the meaning the author probably intended. This necessitates a certain self-consciousness on the reader's part: a preliminary understanding of a work (word, sentence) is scrutinized, and then, after some weighing of evidence, either confirmed or rejected. But reading is not the self-conscious act Hirsch's model requires. According to Fish, the act of reading and the determination of meaning occur simultaneously:

> one hears an utterance within, and not as preliminary to determining, a knowledge of its purposes and concerns ... to so hear it is already to have assigned it a shape and given it a meaning. In other words, the problem of how meaning is determined is only a problem if there is a point at which its determination has not yet been made, and I am saying that there is no such point. (310)

The reader does not self-consciously scrutinize the accuracy of her guess, because the meaning she construes is not a guess at all. If it were a guess, the reader would know to test it against the high intellectual standard Hirsch speaks of. Fish's argument suggests that the reader never has the opportunity to *choose* between the possible meanings of a text (or between the three poles which would govern that choice) because the very act of reading *constitutes* that choice. Strictly speaking, there is no choice at all. The reader simply always understands the literal meaning of the text.

Consider, for example, a reader who encounters the line "Our own God gave us, gave us the bird" from James Tate's poem "With a Child All Day" (*Selected* 170; see Appendix). The meaning of this line seems obvious; there appears to be only one thing the line can mean, and therefore there is no reason to submit this "imaginative guess" to a critical moment. A second reader, however, may be aware that 'the bird' is an idiomatic

expression for that time-honored gesture otherwise known as 'the finger.' While this expression is commonly known within the late-twentieth-century North American milieu in which Tate is writing, it is by no means universal, and I would not be surprised to find that many readers of Tate's poem were unfamiliar with it. One may object that this second meaning is obscure, and that it is somewhat unfair of Tate not to clarify such an obscure meaning in his poem. But there is no guarantee that this *is* Tate's meaning. Tate might have had a more familiar species of bird in mind, a pigeon or a hawk or something. In which case it is the 'finger' reading which is obscure, and we could argue that by proposing it the second reader is not adequately participating in the conventions of language and literary interpretation. But the second meaning *is* conventional, although not as conventional as the first one, and raises the question I posed in Chapter 1 as to just how conventional a meaning must be, in Hirsch's theory, in order for it to qualify as the verbal meaning of the work. Just as it would be impossible for the first reader to arrive at the 'finger' reading of Tate's line, it would be equally impossible for the second reader to arrive at the 'pigeon' reading. The second reader will be able to 'see' this meaning, of course, but she will not be able to see it as *the* meaning; such a reading will strike her as too literal and naive. It is at this point that we usually conclude that such a line is ambiguous. If so, it is no more or less ambiguous than the line "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" from Eliot's "The Waste Land" (2526). If I take this line to be quite obvious in its single, literal meaning, it is only because I cannot even imagine that the line could possibly mean anything else. To the reader who can conceive the obvious second meaning, however, my reading will seem impossibly naive.

If the critical moment submits the meanings produced in the divinatory moment to a high intellectual standard, it only submits those meanings which the reader is capable of

divining in the first place. If none of these divinatory moments coincide with the author's intention, then no amount of critical scrutiny will produce the meaning the author 'probably' intended. This suggests that the misinterpretation of an author's intention is not simply a matter of incorrectly choosing a meaning from an array of possible meanings, all of which are known to the reader. Misinterpretation *may* be the result of an incorrect choice: I may interpret the word 'lap' as the part of the body created when someone sits down rather than, as the author intended, the trip a swimmer makes from one end of a pool to the other. But misinterpretation may also occur when the author's intended meaning does not exist among the array of meanings already familiar to the reader. It never occurs to the reader that there is another meaning which she does not know.

A critical moment would only be activated if the reader felt a need to subject her understanding to one, if she had some cause for doubt. Consider, for example, the interpretive fiasco that can occur when a teenage reader comes across the word 'intercourse' in some Victorian novel. Knowing only a single definition of the word 'intercourse,' the reader naturally concludes that a sexual act is taking place, and she continues to read the novel in the light of this understanding. But when no further reference to this sexual relationship is made she may begin to question her understanding, and hopefully, if she cares enough, she will retrace her steps to the source of her confusion and search for an alternative definition of 'intercourse.' When she finds one, she realizes her mistake and revises her understanding. This kind of retrospective correction, of course, requires a perspicacious reader; a different reader may simply rearrange her understanding of the novel in order to accommodate the sexual act rather than question her original understanding of the word.

There are, however, situations in which a text is not already understood as something, in which the critical moment is prompted before the understanding is construed. I recently taught a class in which there was some disagreement over the following lines from Yeats's "Easter 1916":

> That woman's days were spent
> In ignorant good-will,
> Her nights in argument
> Until her voice grew shrill.
> What voice more sweet than hers
> When, young and beautiful,
> She rode to harriers? (Yeats 178)

The difficulty we had in construing the sense of these lines centered around the meaning of the word 'harriers,' which has several definitions. I saw the harriers as rabbit-hunting dogs: that young and beautiful woman went out on the fox hunt, riding along with the harriers. I found support for this image in the man who "rode our wingèd horse" in the following lines. One of my students saw the harriers as members of an opposing political faction who harried, or attacked, that woman during her nights of argument. She "rode to" these harriers, harrying them in turn with her own shrill attack. Other students proposed credible readings based on other definitions. In this case the critical moment was only prompted because the intended meaning of the word had not already been determined. No one in the class suggested that the word 'argument' be construed as "the angle that fixes the direction of a complex number" (*Webster's* 60) because no one had any doubt about the intended meaning of that word. Within the context – or what was understood to be the context -- the word 'argument' made perfect sense. The word 'harriers' could not immediately make sense, because nobody in the class came to the poem with even a single definition of the word. If we had all been equipped with poor-quality dictionaries which gave only a single definition, we most likely would not have had any difficulty incorporating that definition

into the context of the poem; the possibilities for interpretation would be constrained by the possible definitions of the word. As it was, we had a choice of definitions, and the meaning was determined on the basis of the definition that made the most sense within the context. Once a definition that made sense was found, that definition became the literal meaning of the word, although different people found different literal meanings. I personally did not self-consciously run through the lines with each of the several definitions of 'harriers,' because as soon as I found a definition that made perfect sense, I understood it as the literal meaning. This illustrates Fish's claim that "intention is known when and only when it is recognized; it is recognized as soon as you decide about it; you decide about it as soon as you make a sense; and you make a sense ... as soon as you can" (164).

One will notice from the above examples that the determination of meaning was automatically equated with the determination of the author's intention. In a manner of speaking, the reader is always seeking the author's intention. Hirsch says that "If a text means what it says, then it means nothing in particular. Its saying has no determinate existence but must be the saying of the author or a reader" (*Validity* 13). This was particularly true in the case of the Yeats poem. At a first reading, the word 'harriers' meant nothing in particular. Its meaning had to come from somewhere, but to claim that it came from *either* the author *or* the reader is inaccurate. When the dictionary provides multiple definitions for a word, the reader does not arbitrarily select a definition, although, if she tried, she could most likely make any definition function within the context. Rather, she selects the definition that makes the most sense. That she does this suggests that she is always seeking what the word *really means*, which is to say, an authorized or intended meaning of the word. But the reader does not self-consciously test her understanding against the probable intention of the author: she immediately understands the text in *this*

way because she assumes that this is the way the text is meant to be understood. To say that she chooses the reading that makes the most sense *to her* is simply to say that she chooses the reading that makes the most sense. If for some reason she disregards the reading that makes the most sense, she can only do so because she knows which reading that is. As far as I know, readers do not do this. The reader does not choose to read the text incorrectly; she does not bracket a correct reading to which her own reading is an alternative. She may argue that the text is ambiguous, that it provides sufficient grounds for at least two different readings; but in this case the ambiguity becomes the intended meaning, the reading that makes the most sense.

The remaining possibility is that the reader has no divinatory moment, that she cannot even make an "imaginative guess" about the meaning. For example, I have no idea what Eliot means by the line "O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag" (*Waste* 2516). "Shakespeherian" appears to be a bastardized form of 'Shakespearean,' while a "Rag" could be either a newspaper of dubious worth or the type of piano composition popularized by Scott Joplin. An interesting array of meanings could be constructed from even these few possibilities, but if these meanings constitute imaginative guesses, they are not credible guesses. There is nothing in the context of the poem to recommend any one of them as *the* meaning of the line, none of them makes any more sense than the others or strikes me as something that could be referred to as "so elegant" or "So intelligent" (2516). There is a difference between the guesses my class made about 'harriers' and my guess about Eliot's line. Although our guesses about 'harriers' were never submitted to a critical moment, each understood her guess as the literal meaning of the word. In short, they were not *guesses* at all. But my guesses about Eliot's line are so many shots in the dark: I do not understand any of them as the literal meaning.

None of this is terribly distressing; we can simply say that I have not understood Eliot's line. But I always understand *something*, even if what I understand is that I have no idea what the words mean. It would perhaps be more descriptive to say that I have not *realized* Eliot's line. No conceptual content has been assigned to the words, they have not been realized as an image, an idea or an emotion. In semiotic terminology, the signifier has not been linked to a signified.[1] My understanding of "The Waste Land" consists of both the lines I have realized ("These fragments I have shored against my ruins") and those I have not ("Shakespeherian Rag"). It is important to emphasize that, in the case of "Shakespeherian Rag", it is not that I am unable to realize the words (I have suggested some possible realizations above), but that I have not already done so. Entire works may be unrealized in the sense that, although the semantic sense of the words has been construed, the reader is unable to organize the semantic sense into some kind of total meaning - in short, she does not 'get' the poem, she does not understand what the poem is 'trying to say.'

The reader will please take this distinction between realized and unrealized lines as highly provisional. Although preferable to saying that the reader has 'not understood,' such a clear-cut distinction is bound to oversimplify the cognitive nuances of the process of constructing textual meaning. That being said, I will draw a further highly provisional distinction between two kinds of realization, which I will call *intuitive* and *cognitive*. Like Hirsch's divinatory moment, an intuitive realization has no methodology: one simply 'gets' the poem. An intuitive realization cannot be taken for granted, of course. If the reader does not 'get' the poem, she will have to construct the meaning through an act of deliberate, conscious cognition. If she has not already made coherent sense of the poem, if she has not already organized it under some paradigm, she can *impose* a paradigm, she can consciously

and willfully *impose* a meaning onto the poem. According to Fish, defenders of determinate meaning like Hirsch use this word 'impose' as a pejorative term for the critical tendency to inflict an idiosyncratic meaning onto a poem, in callous disregard of the obvious meaning (306). Fish rejects the word because it implies an act of conscious will that is simply not the case. Readers do not *first* scrutinize the poem and *then* assign it a meaning; rather, the meaning has already been assigned as the poem is being read. But Fish does not consider the exceptions to the rule. In cases where the meaning has not already been assigned (as was my experience with "Shakespeherian Rag"), the reader certainly can impose a meaning, and may very well do so. A cognitive realization is a willful imposition of meaning, it is methodically produced through conscious rational thought. It is a creative act, a matter of imagining a context in which all the textual elements function. It is a way of rationalizing the poem.[2]

We could say that while an intuitive realization is ineffable, a cognitive realization exists only in language; it is realization *as* an articulation. We can, of course, make the gesture of articulating an intuitive realization. In that gesture, however, a transformation occurs: irrational meanings are rationalized or abandoned, ineffable meanings are altered, reduced or left out altogether. At the same time, the resources of language allow previously nonexistent meanings to come into being. The realization is in effect translated from the intuitive mode to the cognitive. This is the logical consequence of the bi-level model of interpretation discussed in Chapter 1, in which a pre-linguistic *understanding* is expressed in a linguistic *articulation*. Terry Eagleton rejects this bi-level model of meaning. For Eagleton, all meaning exists in language: "Perhaps the reader would care to experiment here by looking up from the book for a moment and 'meaning' something silently in his or her head. What did you 'mean'? And was it different from the words in which you have just

formulated the response?" (67-8). This experiment is fine if one limits meaning to something which is consciously willed. For Eagleton, the noun 'meaning' is correlative with the verb 'to mean' in the sense of 'to will' or 'to intend.' But everyone understands meanings which they do not will – emotions, for example – and one of the things that authors do is attempt to express such meanings, "to generate semiotic equivalents for experiences that seem to defy duplication in mere signs" (Scholes 35).

For most readers, there is no obligation to realize a poem. If an intuitive realization is not achieved, the reader is free to simply concede her confusion and stop reading. However, some of us (students, critics, professors) cannot afford this concession. Faced with a difficult literary work on the one hand and the obligation to articulate an understanding of it on the other, we sometimes turn to a particular critical theory as a convenient, available way of explaining the work, a 'lens' through which what was previously invisible now comes into view, not unlike 3-D glasses. The bemused literature student can take comfort in "the idea of a method whose procedures, like a cooking recipe, can be repeated mechanically and which no work can "resist[...]"" (Harari 11), while critical methodologies or 'approaches' can be praised for "dealing with texts that are exceedingly resistant to interpretation".[3] As these texts were presumably written *to* resist interpretation, the ability of the critical methodology to 'deal with' them does not necessarily constitute a benefit to the text. Nor is dealing with the text the proper function of criticism. Jonathan Culler claims that

> courses in which students read theorists as a series of 'approaches' to literary works are predicated on two interconnected but fallacious assumptions: that the function of literary theory is to make possible better interpretations of literary works; and that one cannot become a skilled interpreter without being exposed to the principal writings in literary theory. (220)

Even the notion of a 'skilled interpreter' is predicated on an assumption which must be questioned. What function does an interpretation serve? What can a skilled interpreter do that an unskilled interpreter cannot? A skilled interpreter of a road map is able to determine the shortest route between one city and another, and we call her a skilled interpreter because we agree that a primary function of the road map is to suggest the shortest route between one city and another. But one may also read a road map for the pleasure to be had in locating one's own city, in dreaming of the places one would like to visit, or in reflecting on how big the world is. In these cases the ability to determine the shortest route between two cities is irrelevant.

The two assumptions Culler mentions suggest potentially devastating consequences. First, the importance placed on interpretation in the classroom may make the student feel that, whatever her understanding is, it is worth nothing unless she is able to articulate it intelligently. As we saw in the cases of Gwendolen and Lady Jane, an understanding may be ineffable and be no less an understanding for that. Attempting to articulate an ineffable experience of meaning, the student may be tempted to quote Emily Dickinson and say that the work made her feel as if the top of her head was being taken off. This is undoubtedly a powerful experience of meaning, and yet this kind of impressionistic remark is deemed, in most cases, inappropriate for the classroom. One can imagine the student with the ineffable understanding constructing a second understanding for the purposes of classroom discussion, a 'social' understanding to complement the 'private' understanding she reserves for home use.

Second, the notion that interpretive skill depends upon a knowledge of criticism suggests a 'critical fallacy' which turns the critical work into a necessary supplement of the literary work, to the extent that Edmund Wilson's article is a necessary supplement of "The

Turn of the Screw" or Stuart Gilbert's book is a necessary supplement for any student who wonders which chapter of *Ulysses* is being referred to as the "Nausicaa" episode.[4] This critical fallacy can be extended to refer to any text or branch of learning posited as a prerequisite for understanding a particular literary work. It has been said that the body of knowledge required "to fully understand *Ulysses*" includes "the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, the history of heresy, Irish legend, European history, mythology, astronomy, Hebrew, Latin, Gaelic, and Gypsy slang" (*Ulysses* 1008). Although these branches of learning can certainly be acquired by those willing to acquire them, other types of knowledge, such as the context of knowledge Corvick's discovery of the general intention hinges on, cannot be purchased for the price of a Harvard education or even a bus ride to the public library; and yet they may be equally relevant to Joyce's novel. By the logic of the critical fallacy any body of knowledge could be considered a prerequisite for understanding. A previous experience of suicidal depression would be a prerequisite for understanding *The Bell Jar*, and a previous experience of racial prejudice would be a prerequisite for understanding *Invisible Man*. Any author would be a damned fool if she expected her readers to come equipped with all the knowledge potentially relevant to her work, and as far as I know authors expect nothing of the kind. All knowledge is potentially relevant. Culler claims that although a knowledge of theory may contribute to a student's understanding of literature, "so may immersion in history, philosophy, astrology, or a love affair" (220). No reader can possess all the contexts of knowledge, and literary criticism does not have a monopoly on the contexts of knowledge relevant to the literary work. When the reader articulates her understanding of a literary work, she cannot help *but* speak from within a context of knowledge, as such a context is supplied by her previous experience of life – the very experience which, presumably, authors speak to.

An understanding, in my use of the term, does not preclude the application of any context of knowledge, literary-critical or otherwise; it simply proceeds on the basis of whatever contexts of knowledge are ready-to-hand. The reader may, for example, be well-schooled in Freudian psychoanalysis. If she now finds herself required to write a final paper on *Ulysses*, she does not choose to read Joyce through the 'lens' of Freudian psychoanalysis because she thinks it will produce a good interpretation; rather, Freudian psychoanalysis is so much a part of the way she looks at the world that she can't help *but* read Joyce this way. She may not even be aware that she is 'using' Freud, for Freud's ideas have become her ideas. She is only 'using' herself; she is *understanding*. Criticism should not be seen as a body of knowledge necessary for the understanding of literature, but as an independent discipline designed to cultivate the student's conceptual knowledge, in the continuing presumption that knowledgeable students make better readers.

The reader may fail to realize parts of the work, but this risk is immanent regardless of whatever knowledge the reader may possess. Everybody knows that literature is difficult. But rather than asking to be 'dealt with,' the work seems to ask the reader to leave the unrealized parts alone, to give herself time to adjust to the strangeness of the language, to be willing to 'not understand.' For this reason I argue against critical approaches which systematize interpretation and provide a way to generate explanations for the text. Through the application of a critical approach the reader achieves closure on the work: the work again becomes an item for consumption. A work that is only partly realized remains open, and the reader is called back to the work in order to resolve the unrealized parts. Unrealized parts add texture to a work: they are latencies of meaning which at any moment can burst open and bring new life to the work by radically altering or augmenting our previous understanding. But even a fully-realized work is never closed in any permanent sense.

Although not exactly sealed, the fully-realized work lies dormant. It itself cannot change, but instead awaits a change in the reader. As the reader acquires new contexts of knowledge, she can return to the work to understand it in new ways. This is not only possible but inevitable, provided that the reader returns to the work.

Unrealized parts of a work do not prevent the reader from articulating her understanding. She can articulate those parts of the work she has realized, while those she has not will not necessarily prejudice her 'total' understanding of the work. Critics frequently leave parts of works unexplained, or else offer provisional explanations by saying something like "Could it be that..." or "Is it possible that...." Presumably, this is the critic's way of saying that although she wants to suggest this clever reading, she isn't entirely convinced of it. The reader can also articulate the *function* that the dark spots play – how they contribute to her understanding of the poem as a whole. Although I do not know what "Shakespeherian Rag" means, the *fact* that I do not know what it means is part of my understanding of "The Waste Land". This is nothing more than Fish's recommendation to replace the question "what does this sentence mean?" with the question "what does this sentence do?" (25).

Admittedly, the distinction between realized and unrealized parts is situated within a traditional model of literature which presupposes that the goal of reading is to attain a lucid and cohesive 'total' understanding of the work. While there are cogent arguments for this model, other equally compelling models have been suggested. Roland Barthes argues that, in opposition to the traditional literary *work*, recent changes in our thinking about language and literature necessitate a new literary object, which he calls the *Text*. By the logic of the work the reader is seen as the interpreter of a meaning which has its origins in the work's historical and racial milieu, its literary lineage, and the author's intentions. The Text rejects

these determinations: it is "read without the father's signature" (Barthes 78). Rather than zeroing in on a signified, the Text is seen as a play of signifiers which explode in a constantly proliferating multiplicity of meaning. This new notion of the Text demands a new practice of reading: rather than simply presenting a fully formulated meaning to be passively consumed, the Text asks for the reader's active collaboration in the construction of meaning. It asks the reader to *execute* the text, "produce the text, play it, open it out, *make it go*" (80).

The major advantage of Barthes's approach is that it precludes the closure of the literary work. Barthes rightly argues against reading as *consuming*: literature is not a bag of potato chips one rips open, devours the contents of and throws away. On the other hand, while Barthes's approach creates a new interpretive goal, it precludes other equally valuable goals. The magnificent meanings found by the characters in James's tale, for example, are clearly the results of reading Vereker's novels as works rather than as Texts. Corvick seems less interested in the play of signifiers than in determining one, final, authoritative signified. Also, as the Text "exists only as discourse" (Barthes 75), it would seem impossible to understand it as an ineffable experience of meaning. It is also difficult to imagine the reader 'losing herself' in the Text, because she is always aware of herself as the producer of meaning: like Brecht's epic theatre, with its deliberate alienation of the audience, the Text is constantly calling attention to its own artificiality. Barthes points out, however, that some literature can only be experienced as work (80), and he does not imply that the meanings produced from a Text are necessarily 'better' than those produced from a work.

Although Barthes emphasizes that the distinction between works and Texts is not determined by their chronological situation (74), the literary innovations of the last fifty

years clearly demonstrate the urgency of a new approach to the literary work. Authors have felt this urgency as much as the critics. In an interview from the mid-Seventies, James Tate expresses the need for "a criticism that can speak intelligently of the new poetry, the poetry of the last fifteen years .... the previous criticism was completely outdated. It was written by critics who were unaware of the discoveries and techniques of the new poets" (*Route* 51). An apt candidate for the Barthesian Text, Tate's poem "The Figure in the Carpet" (*Shroud* 59-60; see Appendix) is a verse adaptation of James's tale which gives another turn of the screw to the theme of authorial intention. Several lines in the poem recall the conversation between Vereker and the narrator: we have the same quest for an intention in line 8, in which somebody "would like to know what is on our minds"; we have the possibility of the revelation of secrets, presumably secrets about the intention (20); and somebody has asked for a clue, presumably a clue to the secrets about the intention (27). The speaker who is keeping the secrets is clearly some kind of artificer, and the work he has created is both "seductive" and "incomprehensible." Like Corvick, the speaker who seeks the intention has discovered in the work a *sense* of meaningfulness which he would like to be able to put into words.

The grammar suggests that there are two speakers in the poem. The first speaker, the speaker of lines 1-14, speaks entirely in the first person plural. He is, apparently, speaking *to* someone, but this is never finally clear. When he says "we would like to know what is on our minds" (8), we are confronted with three possibilities: (a) the "we" is a straight plural. The line may be paraphrased as "we both have something on our minds, and we both would like to know what that is." (b) the "we" is the royal "we" – the speaker grandiosely refers to himself in the first person plural. The line may be paraphrased as "I would like to know what is on my mind." (c) the "we" is an ironic riposte to a second

person. The line may be paraphrased as "*you* would like to know what is on *my* mind when *I* organize these shadows."

In line 15 a second speaker appears. This speaker refers to himself as "I" and to the first speaker as "you" and "Binky." We remain with the second speaker through the end of the poem. A third character is introduced, a silent witness, the addressee of the lines "And if there are they best be espied/ over at Binky's place, his rotunda has a view of some" (22-3). The distinction between the two speakers is only provisional, however. Nothing clearly marks a shift from one speaker to the next; either speaker could theoretically be speaking at any time, and the silent witness may in fact be yet another speaker. We cannot even be certain about the number of characters: the royal "we" opens the possibility that the poem is a monologue, that a single "Binky" indiscriminately refers to himself in the first, second and third person.

Largely for these reasons is the poem forbidding, even "incomprehensible", and in order to make some sense of it the reader is not only invited but required to impose some kind of situational context. Although the poem makes no explicit reference to an author or a critic, the surface similarities between Tate's work and James's substantiate our importing the framework from James's narrative. We can construct a scenario in which the first speaker is an author, a poet. This poet is clearly in his twilight years, having spent the better part of his creative endowment, and is now settling down to a life of undemanding "useful tasks" and uneventful "mildly good times" (2). Even the poems he continues to write are "not a big effort" (5). The bewildered poet questions the critic's guesses about the meaning of the poems – "a maze?" (9); "a slumber party?" (10); these guesses are reminiscent of the reductive meanings proposed by the narrator of James's tale. In lines 8-14 the poet seems also to be speaking of his own attitude toward the poems: if for the critic the poems are

seductive yet incomprehensible, for the poet the poems are “shadows” in which he loses any sense of self. The implication is that the poet has been writing the poems in an attempt to elude the selves which “have been following us/ and pestering us all these years” (12-13).

The shift to the second speaker, the critic, comes in an ironic allegation about the poet’s psychological health: “Oh you talk a good game, Binky. I can see/ that you have a nervous system shaped like Florida” (15-16). The critic, while he suspects that the poet’s melodramatic description of his poems reveals some kind of psychological disturbance, also implies that this description is mere affectation on the poet’s part. The following lines (17-8) suggest the imminence of the poet’s death – the return to the place he was before he was born – but are to some extent undermined by the following line: “Did I say egg? I meant dog” (19). This line could be taken to suggest the poet’s belief about the nature of death, reflecting the belief of certain South American Indian cultures that when the body dies a dog leads the spirit into the afterlife. Dogs are frequent denizens of Tate’s poems, often seen as traversing the boundary between life and death. Joshua Clover sees the recurring motif as various appearances of a single dog who travels through the body of Tate’s work, fulfilling various obligations, “including surviving its *own* funeral” (65). This line can also be read as a monkey wrench thrown by Tate into the reader’s attempt to make sense of the poem: in an ironic comment on the intentional fallacy, Tate suggests that what is *said* is not necessarily what is *meant*. As it is the critic and not the poet who speaks the line, this ironic comment is a role-reversal of the poet-critic relationship, the critic giving the poet a taste of his own medicine.

Seeing that no secrets are forthcoming, the critic takes up a trivial but practical task (20-1). The next lines mark the shift in address: the critic now refers to the poet, Binky, in

the third person. The critic appears to be addressing the silent witness at this point, but another possibility is that the critic, still addressing the poet, is referring to a third person who, like the poet, is named Binky. This suggestion will seem less outlandish if we recall the two Quentins in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. By introducing a second Binky, Tate would be throwing yet another monkey wrench into the interpretive works, although perhaps simultaneously sympathizing with the reader's indignation over being deliberately misled by the author.

If secrets are espied, then "it won't follow us" (24). This "it" could refer to the "selves" which were following and pestering in lines 12-13, or, in keeping with the rule of pronoun agreement, to the dog in line 19. If the dog is indeed the poet's guide into the afterlife, then the spying of secrets – the critic's comprehension of the poet's work – will send the dog away and thus prolong the poet's life. This suggests the traditional notion that an author gains immortality through his work, and could explain why the incubators in line 26 are no longer necessary: the poet no longer needs to nurse his "shadows", as they have found a guardian in the now-comprehending critic. There is a more obvious link, of course, between the incubators and the egg in lines 18-19, and I wouldn't bet money on this 'immortality' interpretation. The last line, presuming that the critic is still the speaker, can suggest either that a clue has been given, so that the line would be taken to imply "That wasn't so hard, was it?"; or that a clue has been refused, so that the implication would be "It doesn't hurt to ask."

Clearly I have not already understood the literal meaning of this poem. There is so much ambiguity about speakers, addressees, pronoun referents and local intentions that Tate seems to have been at pains to prevent the reader from arriving at a literal meaning. Even by self-consciously constructing the meaning I am still unable to arrive at any

cohesive reading. I can realize the lines, but I realize them in too many ways at once. The poem does not follow through on any of these realizations; each one undermines the others. While James's "The Figure in the Carpet" suggests a variety of readings, it is at least possible to read the tale consistently as one thing or another. Tate's poem also suggests a variety of meanings, but prevents us from reading it consistently in any one way. His poem is a meaning-making machine that turns on but won't turn off, churning out new meanings, each new meaning destroying the meanings already produced.

If pressed to do so, the best 'general intention' I could propose is that Tate's "The Figure in the Carpet" is meant as both a parody of the critic who would hunt the author down and demand to know "what is on our minds," and as a self-parody, a reaction against the willful obscurity of authors. This recalls Fred Kaplan's interpretation of James's tale, quoted in Chapter 1, and we could do worse than call Tate's poem "an ironic expression of some of the frustration he felt being viewed as a writer of "difficult" works when he himself believed his [works] were absolutely lucid" (Kaplan 412). In this light, Tate's adaptation of James's tale can be seen as simply following the conventions of the figure-in-the-carpet 'genre.' The poem also proves a nice complement to the earlier work, furnishing a piece of the puzzle missing from James's tale: as if the tale itself didn't already put the reader through the interpretive gestures demanded of Corvick and the narrator, Tate's poem is a simulacrum, not of Vereker's oeuvre (which has, after all, been solved), but of Vereker's oeuvre as it appears to the narrator: the reader of the poem is given some idea of how frustrating the narrator's quest for the general intention is -- believing that a meaning can be found, yet being unable to find it.

We can see from the above paragraph just how easy it is to construct a reading which rationalizes the poem. Although I was unable to achieve any literal meaning, any

intuitive realization, I simply take a step back and imagine a wider context in which all the unrealized parts of the poem are gathered together under the umbrella of a single meaning. Tate's poem is not unlike the late works of Monet: if one stands too closely to the canvas, all one can see are streaks of color, none of which represent anything. By taking a few steps back, these streaks of color are gathered together into a lily pond or the Rouen cathedral. Tate's poem can now be seen to be *about* its own lack of meaning: by refusing to mean in any consistent way the poem forces me to think about its function and challenge my tendency to search for consistent meanings. This, of course, becomes Tate's intention in the poem. While this seems paradoxical, such paradoxes are a widely-acknowledged feature of Tate's poems. James Harms points out that "part of the point of a Tate poem – which is to impose upon this master of the seemingly pointless a somewhat contradictory purpose – is to frustrate interpretation" (82).

And yet, I am dissatisfied. I don't *believe* in my reading. A poem is like pie dough: the more you handle it, the less palatable the results are. Failing to *find* the literal meaning of the poem, I have self-consciously labored to *construct* something which can properly be called a reading. In an epigraph to Chapter 1 of *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch quotes Northrop Frye to make the point that we never actually *find* the meaning of a work: "It has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. The remark may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of all works of literary art without exception" (1). The implication of Frye's remark is that, although it is inherent in the act of reading, this division of labor between author and reader normally passes unperceived by the reader. Although she brings the meaning to the picnic, the reader believes that she has arrived empty-handed and that the meaning is waiting for her when she sits down. Tate's poem, however, foregrounds the

division of labor: all pretensions to an intended meaning are dropped, and the reader is made well aware that whatever meaning she gets from the poem will not be the author's meaning but her own.

In Chapter 1 I referred to the 'puzzle model' of interpretation, according to which the reader's sole obligation is to extract the author's intended meaning from the 'disguised' version of that meaning represented by the work. According to this model, the work is like a jigsaw puzzle. A jigsaw puzzle has but one correct solution, and once this solution has been found there is little left to do with the puzzle but congratulate oneself on one's own diligence in solving it. The division of labor Frye speaks of suggests a second 'puzzle model' which, like the first, turns the poem into a superfluous object. In the second puzzle model, the poem is like one of those magnetic poetry kits one buys for the refrigerator door, each magnet inscribed with a different 'poetic' word, *moon*, *summer*, *love,* and so forth. The magnetic poetry kit cannot mean anything by itself, but the words can be rearranged into countless meaningful units through the participation of the 'poet.' While Frye suggests that this second puzzle model obtains as a matter of course but unbeknownst to the reader, Barthes suggests we adopt this model as a conscious, deliberate approach to the Text. This approach is certainly liberating, but it also presents some serious disadvantages. If there is no intended meaning to be communicated, and reading is simply an exercise of my own skill in constructing meaning, then the poem has nothing unique to offer me. I can perform the same interpretive gestures with a newspaper, a philosophical treatise or the text on a cereal box. This is not *reading* poetry at all, as there is nothing to read. I do not 'produce' the poem in the metaphorical sense implied by Barthes: I quite literally produce the poem myself.

Theorists are constantly warning us about the dangers of solipsism in interpretation. The strongest argument for critical approaches is that, as they are based on collectively-developed theories which address universal social or physical phenomena, they engage me in a broader discourse and prevent me from arriving at understandings which are merely reflections of my own subjective world.[5] But I don't want to be solipsistic; I don't read poetry simply to exercise my skill at making meaning. Meaning is not something I want for its own sake; the meaning must be *of* something. I *want* to arrive at the literal meaning of the poem, to know what is being communicated, to know what the author is *trying to say*. My objection to the second puzzle model is not that it opens the doors to interpretive anarchy, that it precludes any agreement on a single meaning which will serve as a standard for all readers across the centuries. My objection is that it prevents *me* from arriving at a single meaning which *I* can believe as the literal meaning *today*.

The division of labor Frye speaks of suggests that the notion of the literary work as a communication between the author and the reader is an illusion. If so, it would seem preferable to accept that fact than to remain in denial. If we cannot know what the author meant to say it seems pointless to go on trying, and our time would be better spent seeking more productive goals for our reading. What I suggest, however, is exactly the opposite. The reader can (and can only) preserve the communicative function of literature by *repressing* her knowledge of the division of labor between author and reader. As the reader, I am always inevitably participating in the construction of the meaning. But that participation is only successful to the extent that I remain unaware of it, that I can preserve the illusion that *this is what the text says*. Once that participation becomes self-conscious, I begin to suspect that my understanding is more a reflection of myself than it is of the poet. Coleridge spoke of a willing suspension of disbelief in that the reader agrees to accept the

conventions of literature and ignore the fact that the work constantly traverses the bounds of credulity. In order to invest emotionally in the work, we allow ourselves to be fooled into believing that people really speak this way and act this way. What I am suggesting is an extension of the same principle. In order to preserve the illusion that her understanding is the single meaning of the work, and thus that she is in communication with the author, the reader agrees to ignore her own contribution to the construction of that meaning.

The willing suspension of disbelief may be demonstrated by my reading of Tate's "Lewis and Clark Overheard in Conversation" (*Selected* 90; see Appendix). In this poem Tate takes a sledgehammer to the illusion that meaning is located *in* the poem, or that the poem embodies an intended meaning which can be communicated to a reader. Apart from the title, the text of the poem consists simply of 23 repetitions of the line "then we'll get us some wine and spare ribs". There is nothing terribly interesting about 'the poem itself,' and we can only imagine what Tate had in mind when he wrote it. But I can produce a compelling meaning from the raw material by locating the line within the context suggested by the title. The ostinato becomes a conversation between the famed explorers who, in the early years of the nineteenth century, led an expedition across the North American continent in search of an overland route to the Pacific. Sitting around the campfire after a long day on the trail, they do not mythologize themselves as the shapers of a great nation, nor fantasize about the glory and lucre that will surely befall them when they return. Instead, they dream of getting drunk and strapping on the feedbag. With the indelicate choice of repast, and the grammatical infelicity of "we'll get us", this is a conversation of giggling yokels which effectively deflates our romantic preconceptions of historical figures. Obviously, this meaning is not 'in' the text by any stretch of the imagination. The poem requires my active participation in the construction of meaning, but I understand this

meaning so immediately, so intuitively and un-self-consciously that I never doubt that it is the intended meaning of the poem.

Rather than discovering the author's intention, the reader constructs it. Although she constructs it, she is not aware that she does so, and takes her construction as the author's intention. The construction of the author's intention is nothing more than the construction of meaning, which is to say, nothing more than understanding the work:

> it seems obvious that the efforts of readers are always efforts to discern and therefore to realize (in the sense of becoming) an author's intention. I would only object if that realization were conceived narrowly, as the single act of comprehending an author's purpose, rather than (as I would conceive it) as the succession of acts readers perform in the continuing assumption that they are dealing with intentional beings. In this view discerning an intention is no more or less than understanding, and understanding includes (is constituted by) all the activities which make up what I call the structure of the reader's experience. To describe that experience is therefore to describe the reader's efforts at understanding, and to describe the reader's efforts at understanding is to describe his realization (in two senses) of an author's intention. (Fish 161)

This notion of the author as a construction of the reader provides a practical route between the two puzzle models. On one hand, it sets limits for interpretation by preserving the illusion of an intended meaning. The reader cannot make the poem mean whatever she wants it to mean, because she is guided by the notion that an intended meaning exists. On the other hand, it prevents foreclosure on the meaning of the poem. Not only can the literary community not lay claim to any objectively 'correct' interpretation, but the reader herself will, over the course of a lifetime, pass through any number of interpretations, each different, each correct. This demands a certain duality of mind on the part of the reader: although she knows that there can be no objectively correct meaning, she pretends that there is one, and that she has found it.

The question of what the author intended only becomes an issue when the reader encounters evidence of an intention that differs from her own construction. This evidence

may be gathered from the author's letters or journal entries, or from a persuasive critic, professor or fellow reader. In this case, the meaning the reader privileges will be determined by her degree of commitment to the meaning she has already constructed. A reader who has intuitively realized a poem will, more than likely, be committed to that meaning, simply because she arrived at it so naturally, so un-self-consciously. She wouldn't have understood the poem in this way if she didn't believe this was the literal meaning; and the literal meaning of a poem is a difficult thing to part with. Her commitment to her understanding is tested, however, when she encounters intentional evidence, and she will have to make a decision to either maintain her understanding, modify it, or abandon it in favor of the more authoritative one. A reader who has only partly realized a poem may gratefully welcome intentional evidence, incorporating parts of the author's (critic's, professor's) understanding into her own. If the reader finds the author's understanding to be more meaningful than her own, she may even exchange her understanding for the author's: this is simply a matter of 'trading up,' and it is difficult to maintain an ethical objection to the reader's desire to get the maximum *meaningfulness* from the poem. It is difficult to believe, however, that a reader would exchange her own understanding for the author's if she found the author's understanding to be less meaningful than her own. It is always distressing to discover that the author's understanding of her work is different from our own, because it destroys the illusion that reading is an act of communication. If the reader does find the author's understanding to be less meaningful, nothing in theory prevents her from holding the author's understanding and her own understanding as discrete categories. But to sacrifice her own rich understanding for the author's comparatively narrow one is to trade the illusion of a meaningful communication for the reality of an unmeaningful communication.

What I am suggesting is not only that the author's intention is always inevitably a construction of the reader. I am also suggesting that the author's intention *should* be a construction of the reader. If the reader is to realize the poem, in the sense of the literal meaning (which is to say, the author's intended meaning), that meaning must be something she is *capable* of realizing. Even if it were theoretically possible to determine the author's actual intention, not everybody would be able to do it, because not everybody possesses the contexts of knowledge necessary for an independent construction of the author's meaning. The reader may, of course, read some interview or journal excerpt in which the author reveals her intention. But even if the reader has this second-hand access to the author's intention, nothing guarantees that she will be able to understand that intention. It may not be enough simply to have the intention explained to her: she herself may have to live through the necessary experiences and acquire the necessary contexts of knowledge. Rather than facilitating understanding, the discovery of intentional evidence can impede it, alienating the reader by revealing a 'correct meaning' which the reader simply cannot understand.

One of the complications in using James's "The Figure in the Carpet" as a vehicle for a discussion of intentionality is that James left behind considerable evidence which could be, and has been, construed as a statement of his intention in writing the tale. It must be a dilemma for any critic to decide whether or not it is tenable to use intentional evidence to interpret a tale which problematizes the use of intentional evidence. The Prefaces which James wrote for the 1908 New York Edition of his works have always posed difficulties for critics. One of the strongest weapons in the perennial debate over the existence of the ghosts in "The Turn of the Screw" is the Preface in which James describes the ghosts as "goblins, elves, imps, demons ... fairies of the legendary order, wooing their victims forth"

(*Art* 175). However, the usefulness of such evidence is dubious at best. In the Prefaces James mentions the waywardness of his original intentions and "the triumph of intentions never entertained" (*Art* 100). Frank Kermode claims, about the Preface to "The Figure in the Carpet", that "When James speaks of the 'intention' of his work, he is not suggesting that there is some simply apprehensible design to which correct interpretation must exactly conform" (26). R.P. Blackmur is somewhat more blunt, saying that "James does nothing to help" in the Preface (204). Hana Wirth-Nesher notes the disparity between James's statements in his preliminary notebook draft and his retrospective comments in the Preface, and wonders which represents James's true intention (124-5).

In a preliminary notebook draft of the tale, James's novelist "doesn't tell what [his general intention] is – it's for the reader to find out. 'It's there – it's *there*,' he says; 'I can't – or I won't – tell you what it is" (*Notebooks* 136). This information could potentially undermine the credibility of my reading of the tale, which takes for granted the fact that Vereker *can't* tell the narrator what his general intention is; but the possibility that Vereker *won't* tell the narrator is alluded to only in the notebooks and does not appear in the published version. Another difference between the two versions – which also threatens my reading -- is the equation which the novelist in the notebook draft draws between intention and meaning: the general intention "isn't the 'esoteric meaning,' as the newspapers say: 'it's the *only* meaning, it's the very soul and core of the work'" (137). F.O. Matthiessen takes this last piece of evidence to affirm the importance of perceiving such general intentions: "The Figure in the Carpet" reminds critics "that their task is not fulfilled unless they have passed beyond the trees to the wood, and have seen an artist's achievement in its entirety" (42). Matthiessen's idea of what a general intention constitutes is worth examining, however. He suggests that a general intention may be found in James's *The*

Wings of the Dove, in that James modeled the character of Milly Theale after his beloved cousin Minny Temple and intended the novel as an homage to her (42-3). It is only by reading James's comments in his Preface and in *Notes of a Son and Brother* that Matthiessen can know this. This may be an interesting bit of information to the reader, and may add a certain richness to her understanding. But it seems foolish to claim that an intention which cannot be ascertained from the novel itself should constitute the meaning of *The Wings of the Dove*.

In volume XV of the New York Edition "The Figure in the Carpet" is joined by four other tales of "the literary life" (*Art* 220). Notwithstanding James's declaration that the five tales "testify indeed, as they thus stand together, to no general intention – they minister only, I think, to an emphasised effect" (221), critics continue to mine the Preface for evidence of his intention in writing "The Figure in the Carpet". Frequently cited is James's recollection of "the lively impulse ... to reinstate analytic appreciation, by some ironic or fantastic stroke, so far as possible, in its virtually forfeited rights and dignities" (228). The first question we must ask about this statement is whether James's "impulse" – his motivation in writing the tale – is to be taken as the tale's intended *meaning*. My impulse in making myself a sandwich may be that I am hungry, but if a friend shows up and I give the sandwich to her instead of eating it myself, does the sandwich thereby lose its meaning? No doubt my friend may appreciate the fact that I gave her a sandwich originally intended for myself, and my generosity may contribute to her enjoyment of the sandwich. But can we say that the meaning of the sandwich is only the fact that I intended to eat it, and not the fact that my friend finds it to be nutritious, delicious and satisfying? Even if my friend does not know that I intended to eat the sandwich -- if she presumes that I expected her arrival and prepared a lunch for her – has she failed to perceive the meaning of the sandwich?

Even if James's impulse is to be taken as his intended meaning, his intended meaning is still not very clear. Did James intend to reinstate analytic criticism on Corvick's part, did he see Corvick's critical efforts as a reinstatement of analytic criticism to their rights and dignities? Did he see the narrator's efforts as such a reinstatement? Or was his intention to reinstate analytic criticism on the part of the readers of "The Figure in the Carpet", did he hope that, by writing such an ambiguous and complex tale, readers would be forced to pay close, analytic attention to his so carefully crafted work? If the latter, then, considering the immense volume of analytic appreciation the tale has received over the last hundred years, without a doubt his intention has been perceived, and with a vengeance.

At the same time, intentional evidence provides useful information that could contribute to a richer understanding of the tale. In the Preface, James expresses his desire for good criticism and his general disappointment in the critics for missing "the intended sense of things" (*Art* 229). His sympathies seem to lie primarily with Vereker: he speaks of "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" (228). In his Preface to "The Aspern Papers" James refers to Vereker as one of his "heroes and martyrs of the artistic ideal" (167). To ignore James's intention as stated in the Preface clears the way for a univocal anti-intentional conclusion. It makes it easier to slight Vereker's importance as a character and his interest in having his intentions perceived. It makes it easier to see Vereker's invitation to the narrator as foolish, to see Corvick's untimely death as the due price to pay for his hubris, to see the whole quest for the general intention as fundamentally misguided. Nevertheless, while the notebooks and Prefaces seem to suggest that James himself believed in the magnificence of Vereker's general intention and approved of Corvick's quest, his primary interest appears to have been in

dramatizing a situation rather than in judging his characters. This judgment is left for the reader: the tale simply "exhibits a small group of well-meaning persons engaged in a test. The reader is, on the evidence, left to conclude" (229).

Should the reader avail herself of intentional evidence or not? One solution to this dilemma is suggested by Wimsatt and Beardsley's discussion of Eliot's notes to "The Waste Land." The authors conclude that "whereas notes tend to seem to justify themselves as external indexes to the author's *intention*, yet they ought to be judged like any other parts of a composition ... and when so judged their reality as parts of the poem ... may come into question" (*IF* 343). In effect, the notes an author provides as to her intention are incorporated into the poem, and, although they may "constitute special information about the meaning ... they ought to be subject to the same scrutiny as any of the other words" (342-3). This allowance is only made for cases in which the notes are published together with the poem, and the focus of scrutiny is on the structural integrity of the notes as parts of the poem. Any subsequent statement the author makes he makes as a critic, and his statement is to be granted no more authority than a statement by any other critic. Fish's position on intentional evidence is similar, but rather than placing emphasis on the structural integrity of the evidence, he places emphasis on the effect such evidence will cause. Although Fish's critical method does not depend upon a presumptive intention, he makes an exception for

> cases where the work includes a statement of intention ... which, because it establishes an expectation on the part of the reader, becomes a part of his experience. This of course does not mean that the stated intention is to be believed or used as the basis of an interpretation, simply that it, like everything else in the text, draws a response, and, like everything else, it must be taken into account. (51)

Like Wimsatt and Beardsley, Fish makes allowances only in cases where intentional evidence is included as part of the work. I would extend this allowance to all intentional

evidence -- letters, journals, prefaces, notebooks and so forth -- for two important reasons. The first concerns the relative 'fictionality' of the evidence. If a statement of intention appears in the middle of a work, this statement is not made by the actual author *per se*, but by a fictionalized version of the author, a narrator or speaker. Even if the author intends her work as autobiographical or 'non-fictional' she is still subject to the conventions of literary interpretation; she is not free to speak as an outside authority from within the confines of the work. As the statement of intention is literally included in the work, there is no reason to assume that it *is* a statement of the author's intention, rather than a statement made by a fictional voice posing as the author. Eliot's notes to "The Waste Land", however, though attached to the poem, are not, strictly speaking, included within the text of the poem. The reader sees them as 'non-fictional' in the sense that she presumes they are written by Eliot as representations of his actual intention. In this case, there would seem to be little difference between such non-fictional notes and any other non-fictional statement by the author. James's Preface to "The Figure in the Carpet", published twelve years after the original appearance of the tale, is no more subsequent to the tale than Eliot's notes are subsequent to the text of "The Waste Land": both Preface and notes refer to their respective texts in equal degrees, and both may be equally attended to, deferred to or ignored.

The second reason I would extend the allowance to all types of intentional evidence is purely pragmatic. It is reasonable enough that a reader who does not feel that the author's intention is relevant will not feel compelled to search for intentional evidence. But a reader may unwittingly stumble across such evidence, and once she has, that evidence is very difficult to ignore. An author's statements about her own intention can be extremely persuasive, and if the reader hopes to maintain her own understanding she will need a firmer theoretical ground to stand on than the simple insistence that 'this evidence is not to

be attended to.' Such insistence is really rather defensive. There is no reason to categorically disregard the author's intention if the reader has confidence in her own ability to construct meaning and is able to withstand the author's authority. There should be nothing terribly threatening about intentional evidence -- a knowledge of the author's notebooks or prefaces is simply more knowledge, and the reader may or may not find that knowledge useful in her understanding of the work.

Although to the best of my knowledge Tate has written nothing specifically on his "The Figure in the Carpet", his interviews and critical writings may be construed as evidence of a 'general intention' in his poetic oeuvre. As with James, rather than providing solutions, this evidence only leaves more information to be sifted and assessed. In an essay which bears a certain resemblance to a Jamesian Preface, Tate reconstructs the process through which he wrote the poem "A Box for Tom", recalling his original 'impulse' and demonstrating a predominant concern with problems of technique (*Route* 120-6). His intention does not seem to have been determined beforehand, but to have evolved simultaneously with the process of composition: "When I started the poem I wasn't sure where it would go" (123). His compositional decisions seem to have been largely intuitive, geared less towards capturing any preconceived 'content' than in creating a sustained mood: "sound was playing a sizeable role in the choices that had to be made within this poem"; the word 'dogshit' was eliminated because it sounded too "tough" (125). In an interesting passage, Tate suggests that his intentions are not referential in any sense:

> when you're writing you're not thinking about who is going to read what you're writing. You're thinking about how you're going to get out of this jam, or something as corny as how wonderful life is with all its mysteries and riddles.
>
> Because most poems of any value do posit paradoxes, paraphrasing is a feeble pursuit. Because they are conveyed in images, you have little of importance when you strip them away: Life is sad, Life is beautiful – that's not saying anything. (125)

Although the poet is *thinking* "how wonderful life is" as he writes his poem, he cannot simply *say* that. Such magnificent understandings cannot be adequately expressed in referential language -- to actually say "Life is beautiful" is "not saying anything".

Like James, Tate testifies to his original intentions going awry in the process of composition: "you go to your desk with the intention of writing a suicide note and end up writing the funniest piece you've ever written ... I know very few poets who are masters of their intentions. That's what keeps it exciting and makes poets so unreliable" (*Route* 61). Tate raises an important point here. Poets are "unreliable" in the sense that, unlike journalists, they are not committed to faithfully representing what they 'really think' or 'really feel' (in "Read the Great Poets" (*Selected* 146-7) Tate's speaker complains that "People read poems like newspapers"). They do not necessarily intend to *capture* an emotional state or ideational content, but to *create* new emotional states or contents through the arrangement of language. This recalls Eliot's notion of impersonality, discussed in the Introduction. It also recalls I.A. Richards's distinction between two types of poetic language: poets do not necessarily use language for the sake of its truth value, for its *referential* function, but for the sake of the effect produced by language, its *emotive* function.

Many readers have a tendency to treat any statement as referential, probably because they themselves generally tend to 'mean' what they say. Such readers may have difficulty perceiving irony, because it never occurs to them that the author or speaker does not 'really mean' what she says; irony may even strike them as a kind of social irresponsibility. It is neither uncommon nor especially difficult to say things without meaning them in the referential sense: I can say "I hate myself and want to die" a hundred

times and it still won't even approach being true. And yet, there is a kind of truth to my remark, in that, although I do not really want to die, I really do like to make flippant, provocative remarks of this kind. In this case language 'means' in the function it serves, without 'meaning' in the sense of having any truth value. The remark is intended in its emotive function rather than in its referential function.

Readers, however, frequently make the mistake of portioning some utterances into the emotive category and others into the referential category by judging the tenability of the utterance's truth value. For example, If I say to my girlfriend "Yesterday I bit the head off a duck," she will, most likely, immediately understand my utterance in its emotive function. But if I say "I hate myself and want to die" she is highly likely to take the utterance as referential, and it may take a whole lot of convincing before she is willing to accept it as being just as emotive as the first utterance. Both utterances are, of course, equally untrue. But my girlfriend may say, in regards to my second utterance, "Even if it isn't entirely true, you must have meant it a little bit, or else you wouldn't have said it." But why wouldn't I have said it? I said that I bit the head off a duck, and that was not true, not even a little bit. My girlfriend makes a good point, of course, in that she knows that I know that the second comment would hurt her, and she knows that I would probably not be so callous as to make such a comment unless I did in fact mean something by it. Poets, however, although they may have audiences, publishers and censorship bureaus to consider, are largely free from the responsibility with language that I am required to have if I expect to continue having a girlfriend. Poets can say whatever they want, and are always free to disclaim the truth value of whatever they say, although they may not always be taken at their word.

Tate's 'unreliability,' his refusal (or constitutional inability, as the case may be) to articulate a referential intention in referential language, has not gone without "inciting

critical puzzlement" (Upton 104), and has frequently resulted in charges of obscurity.[6] In a generally favorable review, Dana Gioia cites Tate's "habitual avoidance of logical structure, his aversion to psychological realism, and his instinctive denial of conventional meaning" as contributing to his conclusion that "Whatever deeper meaning the poems have – if, indeed, they do cohere at a deeper level – remains largely inaccessible to the reader" (79). Such charges are apparently widespread enough for Tate to feel compelled to defend himself: "I don't intend ... for the poems to be cryptic or obscure at all. I don't want the reader to be lost for a second, but on the other hand the externals of the poem are only the tip of what the poem is trying to suggest. I think it's the reader's luxury to fill in the rest of the text" (*Route* 160).

The reader, of course, may not want to fill in the rest of the text, and rather than viewing Tate's poems as invitations to the construction of meaning, she may simply regard them as being carelessly obscure. The charge of obscurity against any poet is fundamentally misguided in that it presumes that what the poet means to say may be expressed in a clearer way than she has done. A poet, one presumes, is not a cryptographer or practical jokester: if she could have expressed herself in a clearer way, she would have done so. As Tate demonstrates through his analysis of "A Box for Tom", poets are always seeking the best way to say what they mean; and if the poet publishes the poem, we can only assume that she feels she has reasonably succeeded in doing so. Readers find a poem obscure either because they have failed to wheedle a referential meaning from it, or because they have succeeded in doing so, in which case the language of the poem will seem needlessly obscure in comparison to the clear, unambiguous referential meaning. "The Figure in the Carpet" is only an obscure poem if we expect it to mean something like "poets are pretentious" or "literary critics are jackals" (similarly, the charges of ambiguity levied

against James's tale result from the difficulty of making such referential statements about its meaning). If, however, we expect the poem to resist its own meaning, to impede our efforts to reduce it to a referential meaning, then the poem is not obscure at all: in fact, it points to this meaning quite clearly. In this sense it is the reader who makes the poem obscure, rather than the poet.

A poem is never obscure in itself. If it is obscure to some readers, it is always clear to others. Those to whom it is clear will fault the others for being dense; those to whom it is obscure will fault the others for reading too much into it. By the same token, there is no such thing as an easy or a difficult poem. It may seem like a truism to say that while everyone can understand *The Catcher in the Rye*, only a few can understand *Ulysses*. But what if the reader has so 'outgrown' works like *The Catcher in the Rye* that when she reads it, rather than having a meaningful experience, she is just bored, and cannot understand what all the fuss is about? Can we not say that she has failed to understand the work? It may strike some as being elitist, but understanding a work of literature will always be a matter of just simply 'getting' it. This does not imply any kind of literary competence – the ability to 'get' a work would only imply that reader's competence for that work.

I do not get Tate's poem. Although I have succeeded in producing a meaning for it, I cannot say that I find this meaning to be particularly *meaningful*. While Tate's "The Figure in the Carpet" puts me through interesting interpretive gestures and forces me to consider urgent questions about literary meaning, it is these gestures and questions which I find meaningful, rather than the poem which occasions them. Once these gestures and questions have been occasioned, I find very little reason to actually *read* the poem: it affords none of the sensual delight of "The Emperor of Ice Cream", none of the emotional appeal of "Easter 1916". An exaggerated instance of the same principle is "Lewis and Clark

Overheard in Conversation": although it is a delightful poem once I have produced it, there is very little to *read* at all (does anyone read all 23 lines of this poem?) Once the poem has been *seen* it has been consumed as a work (there is no need to see the poem again) and henceforth exists solely as a Text. The experience of meaning is no longer something that occurs simultaneously with the act of reading the poem: it can occur anywhere at any time.

But whereas I enjoy the meaning I produce from "Lewis and Clark", I do not enjoy the meaning I produce from "The Figure in the Carpet". All work and no Text may indeed make Jack a dull boy, but all Text and no work, in this case at least, do not make for a particularly meaningful reading experience. In the end, I can only say that I do not like this poem. This may seem impossibly subjective and unscientific, but I will argue that all literary judgments are rendered in this fashion. There is no other way to render them: if the reader constructs both the text and the author's intention, there can be no objective standard for literary judgments, and the only thing I can determine is whether or not it meets my own subjective criteria for a successful poem. If a poem succeeds because it *works*, as Wimsatt and Beardsley maintain, then any poem can be successful if the reader *makes* it work, if she makes it speak toward an intention. For all the alleged objectivity of the New Critics, it is not difficult to imagine that their evaluations were based upon a predisposition to the poem, that they made work the poems they wanted to work, and made not work the poems they did not want to work.

The reader has a choice as to whether or not she will make the poem work. I could just as easily have discarded Tate's poem, after a few readings, as obscure rubbish. But I continued to think about it, to give it the opportunity to justify itself, and I did this because of a certain obligation to articulate an understanding of the poem. I do not have this obligation with the majority of poems that I read, and so whether or not I give the poem the

opportunity to justify itself must depend upon some other factor, which I suggest is nothing more than an initial predisposition to the poem. James says that "The only obligation for which in advance we may hold a novel ... is that it be interesting" (*LC1* 49), and while this again may seem impossibly unscientific, it is accurate, and it provides more than sufficient reason for reading a book. If I find a novel or a poem interesting on the first reading, I will read it a second time, and if I still like it, I will read it a third time. The more times I read it, the more I will find in it. The more I find in it, the more likely I am to make it work, to make it speak towards an intention. If it does so, I will judge it a successful poem.

Literary works do not have *meanings*. Authors do not *intend* to say things -- they say them. All we can presume about an author's intention is that she intended to write the work she wrote. At the same time, literary works can be *meaningful* in the most profound sense of the word. The reader does not *search* for meaningfulness -- she either finds it or she doesn't. If she continues to read literary works, we can only assume she finds them meaningful: it is difficult to imagine that she would go on performing a meaningless exercise. Whether she derives this meaningfulness from the author's intention, from the poem itself, or from a possibly ineffable experience, the end result is *pleasure*. Assuming that a primary function of literature is to give pleasure, finding that pleasure would itself be a justification for reading, and consequently, what the reader perceives as the sources of her pleasure would be a not-inappropriate focus for literary criticism.

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[1] These terms were introduced by the structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The *signifier* is "a sound-image, or its graphic equivalent"; the *signified* is "the concept or meaning" evoked by the signifier. "The three black marks *c-a-t* are a signifier which evoke the signified 'cat' in an English mind" (Eagleton 96).

[2] A cognitive realization is not to be confused with the painstaking mental effort required to make sense of a difficult work, the line-by-line construction of what the words mean. In such a case, the reader may quite likely reach an intuitive understanding once the semantic sense has been ascertained.

[3] This quotation is from a blurb by Philip Lewis on the back cover of Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry*: "Riffaterre's readings, sometimes dealing with texts that are exceedingly resistant to interpretation, constitute a veritable gold mine."

[4] Joyce's schematic for *Ulysses*, including his working chapter titles, was first revealed in Gilbert's *James Joyce's Ulysses*. The published criticism generally refers to Joyce's chapters by these titles, although the titles do not appear in the novel itself.

[5] It could be argued that discourse-based understandings are equally solipsistic in that the reader, rather than trying to understand the unique language of the poem, imposes a language that represents conceptual paradigms with which she is already familiar. The understanding produced is undoubtedly social; but the poem, rather than challenging the reader's perception of the world, simply reaffirms it.

[6] For an assortment of scathing remarks on Tate's work, see Gioia 76 and Upton 104.

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The following abbreviations are used in the text:

AF "The Affective Fallacy"
IF "The Intentional Fallacy"
FC *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*
LC1 *Literary Criticism, Vol.1*

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APPENDIX A
"With a Child All Day" by James Tate

Little ragamuffin, brat, a craving for Sen-Sen
as we walked along the Académie;
it is all that interests you.
I remain quiet and my manner annoys you;
I'm present and unaccounted for.
The tunnels are not crowded in this part of the city.

Finally I say I like dogs, possible dogs, worn thin.

We're in the wrong place, our favorite season.
Ill luck has surfaced again and you do as you please.
I hang on to you around the corner.
There is something lacking even now.
Come, whitewash my fasting worth.

Something living touched me; a plant?
You pretend to recognize old friends.
Why this embarrassed despair, this recoiling?
City of Love – I can't breathe.

Our own God gave us, gave us the bird.

Goodbye.

APPENDIX B

"The Figure in the Carpet" by James Tate

Even the abandoned husk of a person can sometimes
perform useful tasks and enjoy mildly good times,
light opera, dusting for cobwebs with long brooms, etc.
We walk a little, pause, look down, walk.
It's not a big effort to do any of this.
It's not as though we were crossing the forbidden
territory of Lop against icy gales,
but we would like to know what is on our minds—
a maze?—when we organize these shadows—
a slumber party?—so seductively, and yet
    incomprehensibly,
until we can't find ourselves anymore,
those selves that have been following us
and pestering us all these years,
which is not necessarily a bad thing.
Oh, you talk a good game, Binky. I can see
that you have a nervous system shaped like Florida.
A lot of good that will do you when it's time
to trace your steps back into the egg.
Did I say egg? I meant dog.
If there are no secrets to be revealed
then I shall resume darning my other sock.
And if there are they best be espied
over at Binky's place, his rotunda has a view of some.
And then when we walk back it won't follow us.
We won't even remember its name
but our next big tag sale will be ablaze with bargain incubators.
And that's all I asked for was a clue.

APPENDIX C

"Lewis and Clark Overheard in Conversation" by James Tate

then we'll get us some wine and spare ribs
then we'll get us some wine and spare ribs
then we'll get us some wine and spare ribs
then we'll get us some wine and spare ribs
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