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“The Figure in the Carpet” as Theoretical Tool

Abstract:

This study is based on the assumption that literary interpretations are explicitly or implicitly influenced by some philosophical system as a general system of thought. In this way, different literary interpretations often hide more general philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, this study tries to show that the interpretation of the given work of art need not be conceived only as application of the general philosophical approach; interpretation of the work of art, as argued in this essay, can in significant ways also show the philosophical approach itself. The subject of this study is the case of Henry James’s short story “The Figure in the Carpet.” This essay includes an analysis of how Tzvetan Todorov, Joseph Hillis Miller, Wolfgang Iser and of Pascale Casanova interpret the story and how they use its dominant image of a “figure in the carpet” for illustration of their own theoretical and philosophical approach.

Keywords:

Henry James, structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response theory, Pascale Casanova

The problem of the interpretation of art, and especially the literary interpretation, is one of the important themes of the philosophy of art. Moreover, the interpretation of a work of art often mirrors, in explicit or implicit ways, the general philosophical assumptions of the critic. In this way, Roland Barthes refers to four dominant philosophies in the background of French literary criticism of the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century (existentialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism), and Stephen Coburn Pepper shows that the non-dogmatic interpretation of artworks has its source in relatively adequate philosophical schemes

(formism, mechanism, organicism and contextualism).¹ In this paper, I will try to show that the interpretation of a given work of art need not be conceived only as application of the general philosophical approach; I argue the interpretation of a work of art can in significant ways also show the philosophical approach itself. One perfect illustration of this strategy is the interpretative adventure of Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet."

The famous story, first published in 1896, belongs to the group of self-reflective tales dealing with the literary life. As Vittoria Intonti mentions, most of them "were written during the last decade of the nineteenth century" in "dramatic years' for Henry James because of the failure of his theatrical experience, which exposed him to public derision."² In the most simplified description, "The Figure in the Carpet" deals with the unsuccessful effort of a young critic to interpret the books of the famous writer Hugh Vereker. (The critic is vainly searching for "the figure in the carpet" – the kind of unifying meaning of all Vereker's books, about whose existence Vereker himself informs him.) This short story can be read as a sort of reflection of James's own struggle with the criticism of these times. The notes James provides in his prefaces and theoretical papers strengthen this hypothesis. When he describes his motivations for writing the tale, he mentions that he created the story by way of generalization from lived experience. On the subject, he stated the following: "what we call criticism – its curiosity never emerging from the limp state – is apt to stand off from the intended sense of things, from such finely-attested matters, on the artist's part, as a spirit and a form, a bias and a logic, of his own."³

On the one hand, the above quotation shows the motivation of the short story by underscoring James's problems with the criticism of his times. On the other hand, James draws the attention of the competent critic to the "spirit and form" of the work itself, to its own logic. It seems that even in James's opinion, "The Figure in the Carpet" should not be read only as a sort of sophisticated revenge on his critics, but as a story of its own logic and significance. In the course of history, this short story became (unlike his plays) a canonical literary work, and it did attract a lot of attention from important literary critics and theoreticians such as Maurice Blanchot, Richard P. Blackmur, Phillip Sollers, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Vittoria Intonti and many others. All these interpreters were trying to find and formulate the specific logic and significance of the story.

But its importance in the literary field does not consist only in being one of the canonical and most interpreted short stories of all time. The title image – "the figure in the carpet" – in the sense of the hidden meaning of the literary work or group of works, did enter the practice of literary critics and theorists. Thomas Stearns Eliot, for example, says in his preface to Rudyard Kipling's verse that as critics "we look, in a poet as well as in [a] novelist, for what Henry James called the Figure in the Carpet. With the greatest of modern poets this Figure is perfectly manifest (for we can be sure of the existence of the figure without perfectly understanding it)."⁴ And Richard Rorty questions Umberto Eco's concept of intention of the text (*intentio operis*) in the following way: "If the text of *Ulysses* has succeeded in getting me to envisage a plurality of figures to be found in the carpet, has its internal coherence done all the controlling it can do? Or can it also control the responses of those who wonder whether some given figure is really in the carpet or not?"⁵ The image of "the figure in the carpet" receives here the sense of overall meaning of the literary work of art, the overarching meaning we can feel rather than fully

1) Cf. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 255–256 and Stephen Coburn Pepper, *The Basis of criticism in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 18–19.

2) Vittoria Intonti, "'The Figure in the Carpet' as an Allegory of Reading," *RSA Journal* 7 (1996): 27.

3) Henry James, *Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 229.

4) Thomas Stearns Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1973), 15.

5) Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 96–97.

understand (Eliot) or, we can think of that meaning as related to the expression of the thought that one work can have a plurality of appropriate interpretations (Rorty). The tale, with its dominant image, therefore, does not function "only" as work of art to be interpreted, but also as an interpretative tool for description of other works of art. As Vittoria Intonti suggests, "'The Figure in the Carpet'... moves in the field of theory. The tale has a definite metaliterary dimension demanding a metareading, which finally discloses the story as a special case of *mise-en-abîme*. What the tale represents is not so much, or not only, an objective reality outside the text, but the communicative situation of literary discourse itself."⁶ Intonti suggests that the competent reading of this tale is a metareading based on theoretical reflection.

In this paper I will argue that the tale does not necessarily demand theoretical reflection for its own reading, but that it can serve (because of the undetermined image of the "figure in the carpet") as a theoretical tool for different theoretical approaches. I will try to show that some theorists not only interpret the tale but also use its strong metaphorical image as illustration of their own theoretical method. I will show how it is used to illustrate many different literary approaches, such as the structuralist method of Tzvetan Todorov, the deconstruction of Joseph Hillis Miller, the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser and the literary geopolitics of Pascale Casanova.

But first, I must introduce some important moments of the tale necessary for the following applications of different theoretical schemes. My aim is not to compare selected interpretations, nor is it to develop some new interpretation. I will try only to show some crucial moments in the development of the image – "the figure in the carpet." The story begins with the narrator of the story, a young literary critic writing a review of the new book by the famous writer Hugh Vereker, whose works he admires. When they meet in person, he is surprised by Vereker's negative attitude toward literary criticism and by the way Vereker responds to the critique of his new book. Vereker claims:

I don't read the things in the newspapers unless they're thrust upon me as that one was – it's always one's best friend who does it. But I used to read them sometimes – ten years ago. I dare say they were in general rather stupider then; at any rate it always struck me they missed my little point with a perfection exactly as admirable when they patted me on the back as when they kicked me in the shins. Whenever since I've happened to have a glimpse of them, they were still blazing away – still missing it, I mean, deliciously. *You* miss it, my dear fellow, with inimitable assurance.⁷

Here begins building an image of the unifying principle connecting all Vereker's books. The critic–narrator tries to spend as much time as possible with Vereker to attain thorough information on the character of the unifying principle, which is described in two discussions between the two men. When the narrator himself suggests some descriptions, Vereker approves or dispels those conceptions. In the course of the narration, the unifying principle is described in different ways but always indirectly. It is described as that which caused Vereker to author all his books – "the particular thing I've written my books most *for*" (FC, 579); as a challenge to competent critics – "it is the finest fullest intention of the lot" (FC, 579); and as a mysterious principle of Vereker's artistic creation – "It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma" (FC, 581). This mysterious invisible principle of the books is then described metaphorically as the "organ of life" (FC, 581) of all of Vereker's work and as "buried treasure" (FC, 582, 583, 591, 595, 606), the metaphor suggested and subse-

6) Intonti, "'The Figure in the Carpet' as an Allegory of Reading," 35.

7) Henry James, "The Figure in the Carpet," in *Complete Stories 1892–1898* (New York: Literary Classics of United States, 1996), 578. In the text, I refer to this source under abbreviation – FC.

quently used by the narrator (but accepted by Vereker only with reservations). Despite the indirectness of its description and its direct invisibility, Vereker considers the unifying principle of his work as something strongly intimate, concrete and real – “to me it’s exactly as palpable as the marble of this chimney” (FC, 580). Finally, the narrator offers the image of a “complex figure in a Persian carpet,” of which Vereker approves, adding that it is “the very string that my pearls are strung on!” (FC, 586).

In the first three sections of the story, the narrative builds up the image of the “figure in the carpet,” and in the next eight sections, we witness the effect that the search for it has on the three main characters of the story – the narrator, his friend and literary critic Corwick, and Corwick’s fiancé Gwendolen Erme. The whole story is narrated in the first-person, so it is most often focalized for the reader from the point of view of the narrator, who is possessed by the idea of deciphering Vereker’s figure. And “deciphering” is a suitable term because he gradually loses all joy connected with the books and what remains is just the unpleasant and mechanical task of finding the secret. As he honestly admits: “I not only failed to run a general intention to earth, I found myself missing the subordinate intentions I had formerly enjoyed. His books didn’t even remain the charming things they had been for me; the exasperation of my search put me out of conceit of them” (FC, 583).

The narrator does not succeed in this task and the main theme of the tale is just this futile yet fascinating search. This search also shows the changing personality of the main character and, in a sense, it changes the reader’s approach to the main character, because the narrator gradually becomes unreliable as a result of his “deciphering agony.” Finally, I would like to point to several moments important for the subsequent description of different theoretical approaches that use the figure as theoretical tool:

1. The whole story is built on the problem of interpreting Vereker’s books, but the reader does not know anything about them and does not even know anything about their critiques. The reader can only mirror the behavior of the main characters. The concreteness of the “figure in the carpet” does not emerge therefore from its aptness to the original source but from the descriptions of the behavior of the main characters. The main motive of the story is therefore empty, in a sense.

2. The unifying metaphor of the book – “the figure in the carpet” – is given only in hints. Narrator and reader are drawn into the search for its nature, but the story ends without any resolution. Moreover, the main image of the story is revealed in a somewhat paradoxical way. It is not graspable by traditional dualities – it is real, but the narrator often doubts its existence; it is concrete but not directly understandable; it is not an element of form, nor an element of feeling (FC, 581).

3. Vereker strongly asserts the existence of the “figure in the carpet,” but the narrator (and to some degree, also the reader under the guidance of the narrator) doubts its existence – “the buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous pose” (FC, 583). The hypothesis of the reality of the figure is nevertheless strengthened by Corwick’s claim that he found it, and his finding is approved by Vereker himself. As a result, the narrator doubts even Corwick’s finding – “I know what to think then. It’s nothing!” (FC, 601). But this moment opens some doubts in the reader’s mind. The point of view of the narrator is imposed on the reader by the strategy of first-person narration. With that perspective, we begin to doubt the reliability of the narration. The image of “the figure in the carpet” is therefore immersed in the atmosphere of multilevel doubts.

4. Corwick says his secret (the nature of the “figure in the carpet”) only to his fiancée, Gwendolen Erme (after their marriage), and they both refuse to share it with anybody else. It is too intimately connected with their lives. In this way, the story strengthens Vereker’s metaphor of the secret as the organ of life.

5. The “figure in the carpet” is, therefore, given as something very concrete, but unspecified and revealed only through a set of different mirroring metaphors. This is probably the reason why it is possible to use it as exemplification of different theories. Each theory emphasizes different moments of the image and therefore different aspects of this unspecified principle.

Based on this introduction I will try to show different theoretical uses of the main figurative image in Henry James's tale.

I. Figure in the Carpet as Structuralist Invariant

Let us begin with Tzvetan Todorov's use of this principle. Tzvetan Todorov devotes his concentrated attention to Henry James's tales, especially in his study "The Secret of the Narration," first published in his *Poetics of Prose* and then reprinted in David Robey's collection of essays *Structuralism: An Introduction* under the name "The Structural Analysis of Literature: the Tales of Henry James." The aim of the whole book is to introduce the different aspects of philosophical structuralism, and Todorov's essay represents the structural approach to literary texts. Todorov is concerned with Henry James stories and is searching for an invariant principle on which the structure of all those tales are based. He begins his investigation with summary of the plot of "The Figure in the Carpet" and continues in the following way:

In approaching Henry James' work, let us take up Vereker's challenge.... Let us try find the figure in the carpet, the primal plan on which everything else depends, as it appears in each one of his works. The search for such [an] invariant factor can only be carried out, as the characters of *The Figure in the Carpet* well know, by superimposing the different works one on the other, like Galton's photographs, reading them as if they were a series of transparencies.⁸

Todorov uses the image of "figure of the carpet" as an equivalent of the structuralist invariant. All James's tales should be but a variation of this basic matrix. The method of the Galton photograph is another impressive metaphor for searching for the common denominator of all James's tales. But in its literal meaning, it is impossible to use this method (or metaphor), because each tale takes some time to read and it is not possible to superimpose one tale on another as if they were transparent. All we can do in this task is to read the tales with minimal pauses and then depend on our memory and imagination. In fact, the narrator of our tale does exactly this in his unsuccessful effort to find "the figure on the carpet." Therefore, it is striking that in the above-mentioned quotation Todorov says that the characters of the tale know that this method of searching for the invariant is the only proper one. In the fictive world of the tale, it simply cannot be truth. At least, the narrator is not successful in finding it. Corwick found the secret on his business trip to India, where none of Vereker's books were available and his only source was his memory of and experience with them. Gwendolen receives the secret from Corwick. And Vereker himself does not search for it. The "figure in the carpet" as a structuralist invariant is just Todorov's own use of a powerful image, to some degree separated from its original context.

Although the derivation of the method from the main image of the story seems to me a little bit doubtful, the result is very impressive. The unifying principle of James's tales (its invariant) is, according to Todorov's opinion, the existence of some secret, of some absent cause which animates the plot of the tale. This cause may be a character, an object or an event and "its effect is the tale, the story which we are told. The cause is absolute: everything in the story owes its presence, in the last analysis, to it. But it is absent, and we set off in quest of it. And it is not only absent but for most of the time unknown as well...."⁹ The basic matrix of the tales is, according to Todorov, some absent secret. This description fits perfectly, and in long and thorough subsequent analysis

8) Tzvetan Todorov, "The Structural Analysis of Literature: the Tales of Henry James," in *Structuralism: an introduction*, ed. David Robey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 74.

9) *Ibid.*, 74–75.

Todorov shows that in James's work there are four different variations of the secret: 1) The secret is naturally explainable and often is explained at the end of the story; 2) the secret has the character of the supernatural presence of the ghost; 3) the secret relates to some type of death; and 4) the secret has the character of a work of art. Todorov is very careful and convincing in showing how the specific tales modify the basic invariant.

What is important for me in this context is that Todorov uses the image of "the figure in the carpet" as a description of the structuralist invariant. We could say that in search for the invariant he tries to decrease the distance of the singular tales and put them one on another as if they were transparent. This allows him to read in some sort of figure in the carpet. But to some degree this method suppresses the process of reading itself in favor of the final interpretation. In the third section of the paper, we will see that the process of reading itself is foregrounded by the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser, who uses for exemplification of his theoretical method the "Figure in the Carpet" story as well. But before that we will turn our attention to the Joseph Hillis Miller's deconstructive analysis of the tale, because philosophical and literary deconstruction is considered as a sort of criticism of philosophical and literary structuralism.

II. Figure in the Carpet as an Allegory of Unreadability

If Todorov is using the powerful image of our tale to exemplify the search for the structuralist invariant, Joseph Hillis Miller uses it as paradigmatic example of the paradoxes of reading literary works of art. He pays close attention to our story in his essay, simply titled, "The Figure in the Carpet" (1980).¹⁰ He later enlarged it and incorporated it into his book *Reading Narrative* (1992).¹¹ At the beginning of the relevant chapter in the latter, he distances himself from the current tendencies to read literary works only as products of some "historical or ideological configurations" and warns us that this strategy "has the danger of overemphasizing context at the expense of reading the work itself."¹² His aim is to study "the verbal intricacies in the works read."¹³ In contrast to Todorov, he pays attention to the process of reading, but this process is considered only as a consequence of the manipulation of the text.

Miller first concentrates on the realistic tone of James's tales and novels and notes that it is just a tool for allusion, a way to approach something beyond the reach of realistic description. For the description of this strategy he uses a traditional rhetorical figure – catachresis. "Catachresis is the name for that procedure whereby James uses all the realistic detail of his work as a novelist to name in figure, by a forced and abusive transfer, something else for which there is no literal name. ... This nonexistence that nevertheless exists, this 'something else', is what the figure figures, as 'The Figure in the Carpet' shows."¹⁴ At first sight, Miller's "catachresis" looks different from Todorov's "secret," but in fact, it is an analogical expression. Miller indeed admits that Todorov's article motivated him, but Miller is far more radical. Todorov's aim is the naming and classification of the different kinds of "secret" involved and extant in James's tales, while Miller refers to the unavoidable "undecidability" of literal meaning in all of James's realistic prose. And the emblematic example of this strategy is "The Figure in the Carpet." He traces this thought by developing Paul de Man's concept of unreadability.¹⁵ Miller defines it in the following way:

10) Joseph Hillis Miller, "The Figure in the Carpet," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 3 (1980): 107–118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772414>.

11) Joseph Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 84–106.

12) *Ibid.*, 85.

13) *Ibid.*

14) *Ibid.*, 95–96.

15) Cf. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), especially Chapter 11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.1979.tb00191.x>.

Unreadability is the generation by the text itself of a desire for the possession of a single meaning, while at the same time the text itself frustrates this desire. The text leads the reader to believe that he or she ought to be able to say what it means. This is the demand made on the reader by any act of reading. At the same time the text makes such a pronouncement impossible. This is what "The Figure in the Carpet" is about, though to claim that one can, in so many words, say what it is about is of course to succumb to the lure, to take the bait (to borrow James's own figures in "The Figure in the Carpet").¹⁶

For Miller the unreadability is not due to anything in the text itself. It refers to the reader's tendency to possess one definite meaning of the text. But this tendency is at the same time blocked by the other possibilities the text invokes. According to Miller, literary texts in this way reveal the main problems of "logocentrism" (the belief in possibility of the definite, final interpretation of a text), which is one of the central problems of philosophical deconstruction. In the above-mentioned quotation, Miller states that the paradoxical position involved in unreadability is characteristic of any act of reading. In Miller's opinion, the tale "Figure in the Carpet" exemplifies it with strong acuteness. Because of that, it is conceived of as an allegory of reading or as an allegory of one of its necessary counterparts – unreadability.

Tzvetan Todorov used our tale as exemplification of the structuralists search for invariant, leaving the investigation of the process of reading itself outside his interest. Joseph Hillis Miller cared for the process of reading but only as the result of the intricacies of the text. The next author, Wolfgang Iser, foregrounds the process of reading itself and understands it as a kind of communicative act. And again, he uses as paradigmatic example for his theory the tale "Figure in the Carpet."

III. Figure in the Carpet as an Exemplification of the Process of Reading

Wolfgang Iser opens his seminal book, *The Act of Reading*, by formulating his position on the theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*), with an interpretation of James's "Figure in the Carpet." Again, the interpretation of the tale is used to outline his own method of literary theory, which is strongly based on Gadamer's hermeneutic and process philosophy. In his interpretation, he concentrates on the reason for the narrator's failure to get the secret and Corwick's success at the same time. The main problem of the narrator in Iser's interpretation is the supposition that the meaning of the text is something to be extracted from it, something already there, waiting for a clear formulation. Iser claims:

The critic [narrator], working with unstinting philological pains, never gives up his attempts to find a meaning that is precisely formulated on the printed page. And so, he sees nothing but blanks which withhold from him what he is seeking in vain on printed page. But the formulated text, as Vereker and Corwick understand it, represents a pattern, a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader; and so, the meaning can only be grasped as image. The image provides the filling for what the textual patterns but leaves out. Such a "filling" represents a basic condition of communication, but although Vereker actually names this mode of communication, the allusion has no effect on the critic, because for him meaning can only become meaning if it can be grasped within a frame of reference.¹⁷

16) Miller, *Reading Narrative*, 98.

17) Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 9.

The narrator's problem is that in relation to the Vereker books, he never did abandon the position of the knower to the known. Because of that, he is not able to constitute the literary image of the work of art, its imaginative situation. This is also the reason for his inability to communicate with the novels and his gradual loss of interest in the books. Iser interprets it as an inability to change the assumption of independent subject (narrator) and object (the literary work of art). This detachment does not allow the narrator to understand Vereker's novels. Iser thinks that the process of communication in which the independent subject and independent object merge into one complex situation is inevitable for understanding. As he puts it:

As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be found but is an effect to be experienced. This is the situation which James thematizes through the perspective of Corwick. After he has experienced the meaning of Vereker's novel, his life is changed.¹⁸

In Iser's interpretation, the tale does not attract attention to the maximally precise formulation of the meaning of a literary text, but to the investigation of the process of reading itself. Contrary to Todorov (and, to some degree, contra Miller) he does not try to identify "the figure in the carpet" of some given text(s), but he tries to show that the "figure" is constituted only in the reader's attentive experience. The secret receives a radically different meaning. It does not have the shape of a formulated yet hidden statement, but instead assumes the form of the reader's experience in which subject and object merge into one situation or event. In this sense, Iser manifests the basic assumption of process philosophy in which the experiential event or situation as a kind of process is the most concrete entity. We could add that without this experience, even Todorov and Miller would not be able to develop their elaborate analyses. Let me end this section with the last sentence of Iser's first chapter: "In reading we are able to experience things that no longer exist and to understand things that are totally unfamiliar to us; and it is this astonishing process that now needs to be investigated."¹⁹

In the previous three sections, I showed three different theoretical uses of James's tale. All three were based on careful interpretations of the tale itself, but each of them emphasized different aspect of its leading image – "the figure in the carpet." In the last section, I will introduce an example, where the author abandons (to some degree) the context of the short story and uses its main image only as support for the theory itself.

IV. Figure in the Carpet as an Argument for World Literature

In her well-known book, *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova advances an important idea. Casanova claims that each literary work of art can be understood only on the basis of wider context. And because the context extends in all directions, she claims that the ultimate context of each literary work of art is the whole literary space. This is an important idea connected in a sense with Thomas Stearns Eliot's dynamic understanding of the literary tradition. What is surprising in this context is that Casanova opens her book with an attempt to interpret James's "Figure in the Carpet" tale.

She identifies the main failure of the story's narrator as the "assumption that every literary work must be described as an absolute exception, a sudden, unpredictable, and isolated expression of artistic creativity."²⁰ However, as we saw earlier, the narrator does not try to interpret the separate books by Vereker, but is instead

18) Ibid., 9–10.

19) Ibid., 19.

20) Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

searching (without success) for the unifying principle connecting all of Vereker's novels. He cannot assume the complete isolation of the given literary work of art. If he did, he would have to skip to another story. Casanova goes on to infer that the Jamesian metaphorical carpet refers, in fact, to the totality of literary domain. She suggests that:

What is apt to seem most foreign to a work of literature, to its construction, its form, and its aesthetic singularity, is in reality what generates the text itself, what permits its individual character to stand out. It is the global configuration, or composition, of the carpet – that is, the domain of letters, the totality of what I call world literary space – that alone is capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very form of individual texts.²¹

Undoubtedly, finding connections among seemingly foreign works of art can help us understand them. Strangeness can be overcome by the invention of new relations. But if I can dare to say this – it is not the topic of our story. Casanova uses the powerful image of "the figure in the carpet" to undergird her own theory, but she changes the context in which the image is involved. The image of "the figure in the carpet" removed from its original context can easily receive all the meaning Casanova gives to it, but this strategy contradicts Casanova's own theory, which is based on radical contextualism. Casanova represents here what Umberto Eco calls overinterpretation of a text. She separates the main image of the story and uses it for her own purposes. The question arises as to why she does this. One possible answer is that the image of "the figure in the carpet" attained certain theoretical prestige – prestige that could be used as support for her own theoretical approach. The image liberates itself from its original context and enters the field of culture not only as a literary motive to be interpreted, but also as a tool leading the interpretation.

V. Conclusion

I tried to show here that the canonical short story by Henry James, "Figure in the Carpet," not only serves as an interesting topic of literary interpretation, but due to the strong image found within narrative, literary theorists can also use it as a tool for explicating their own theories, often based on some general philosophical approach. The reason for this flexibility resides in the specific indeterminacy of the main image of the tale. In this sense, "The Figure in the Carpet" is not only a canonical work of art. Its dominant image, "the figure in the carpet," is also a canonical theoretical tool, and one which does not lose its impact even if removed from its original context. In the analysis of Tzvetan Todorov's, Joseph Hillis Miller's and Wolfgang Iser's approach to the text, I showed how their interpretations of the image (respecting the context of the tale) can illustrate the interpretative strategies of such different literary theories and philosophical systems as structuralism, deconstruction and process hermeneutics. In the analysis of Pascale Casanova's use of the image, we saw how the image is in a way detached from the rest of the tale and filled with a new meaning corresponding to Casanova's theoretical approach. In a sense, the image is not used here as a part of the literary work of art but as a theoretical tool. In its (at least partial) detachment from its original context the image of "the figure in the carpet" undergoes a transformation similar to the kind captured in famous philosophical and theoretical concepts, such as Kant's "disinterestedness of judgement of taste," Roland Barthes's "death of the author" and Edward Bullough's "psychical distance." Perhaps, a-contextual use of powerful concepts is one of the features of our turbulent age. But when we detach those concepts from context, we should know what we are doing. Of course, we can use these concepts

21) Ibid., 3.

within the context of the new meaning provided, but we should not in that case claim the authority of Kant's philosophy, Roland Barthes's thought, Edward Bullough's psychology and aesthetic or Henry James's literature. Moreover, the interpretive strategies of Todorov, Miller and Iser show that the image (or concept) is powerful and polysemic, if we respect its original context. Respecting the original context does not mean repeating it. That would be impossible because of our changing historical situation. This line of thought opens the door to several important questions, like those pertaining to the difference between interpretation and overinterpretation; questions that draw attention to the relation of artistic and philosophical images; and those that foreground the relation of past, present and future. But to attempt to answer those questions lies beyond the reach of this study. I must leave them open, but I will add that they stay open even if once answered.

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