To Begin, a "Postscript"

Joseph Albrecht

University of Northern Iowa

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When I completed my first reading of Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet," I was annoyed because the mysterious "figure" had not been revealed. Like the narrator of the story, I had presumed that there was indeed such a figure, and I was vexed at having allowed myself to be misled when I should have known better. (After all, anyone who has a passing acquaintance with Henry James knows of his fondness for ambiguity.) Nevertheless, I was upset with the story and with James himself. I found myself comparing the story unfavorably to his "The Turn of the Screw," even though that story is wonderfully ambiguous. Finally, I had to admit that, like the narrator, I had presupposed that this story would reveal some secret, that there was in fact a "buried treasure" hidden in the text. When the story revealed no such secret, I became as frustrated as the obsessed narrator.

It was in this frame of mind that I sat down to write, determined to reach some firm conclusions about this troublesome story, which is really a tale about writers and writing, about textuality itself. Since the story involves a search for a treasure of sorts, it seemed well suited to an archetypal reading, specifically the archetype of the heroic quest. In this case, however, the quest is fruitless and thus fails to fulfill the conventional outcome of the archetype. I asked myself why this was so, and a theme suggested itself: Texts by their nature resist closure, just as readers by nature desire it. Texts cannot be "solved" once-and-for-all; they must remain open so as to remain alive.

This was hardly a revelation; as a teacher of literature I had always urged (or thought I had) a variety of readings. Certainly I had not insisted on any one interpretation at the expense of all others. Yet, here I was, demanding a definitive reading from myself when I should have known better.

The essay that follows did allow me to reach closure about the story, but not for long. Even after the writing was freshly completed, I sensed the incompleteness of my reading. In subsequent weeks of class discussion, our group worked doggedly to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the story itself and our individual readings of it. Each week saw a new interpretation develop and a fresh essay appear. Every attempt to stretch the limits of possible interpretation revealed something new about the text and also about ourselves as readers and critics. One keen explication would seem to close the text whereupon another equally in-
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sightful reading would reopen it. My uneasy assurance about what the text said or meant gave way to avid doubt. The possibilities began to seem endless, and my frustration turned to profound appreciation, both for the craft of Henry James and the inventiveness and curiosity of our small community of readers.

My essay appeared first and its orthodox approach helped generate a chain reaction of new readings. I was painfully aware that my own reading was inadequate, but as each new interpretation presented itself I began to feel less inadequate for having written it. I chose instead to view my own contribution as one helpful peek at the story, and rather than feeling distressed that I was unable to provide a definitive criticism of the story, I felt pleased that I was able to contribute at all.

As critics we sometimes feel compelled to react against other critics, straightening out their crooked thinking. We may try to tear out their flawed weaving in the critical tapestry and replace it with our own truer work. Critics sometimes behave as if texts could allow only one ultimately correct reading: their own. No wonder that students in the classrooms of such critics are intimidated and frustrated!

The experience that led to this volume proves that readers and writers can set ego and certainty aside, and that teachers of literature need not fear the ambiguity of texts. Rather, they should remember that surprise, delight, and mature meaning in literature happen only when a community of readers cooperate in inventing and reinventing the text. Only in this way can the full richness of the “figures in the carpet” be revealed.