Denied Expectations

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Denied Expectations
by Ann Ellsworth.

Henry James manipulates his readers unmercifully in "The Figure in the Carpet." There are always lures, always tentative hopes that the secret, which is variously and curiously described, will in the end be made plain. In spite of the narrator's dashed expectations and waning enthusiasm to know what Vereker thought was the essential feature of his work, we readers still wonder. This paper will examine some of the ways that James arouses our desire for knowledge and meaning. By thwarting this desire, James tosses the gauntlet at our feet. It is the reader's task, not the writer's, at this point to struggle with indeterminacy and to discern meaning.

During my first reading, my attention was directed primarily to and by the narrator. I found him to be candid, opportunistic, and amusing. I resented his vulnerability to the lure of Vereker's secret because I found it to be my own as well. He was truly functioning as my surrogate in the text and I resisted but could not totally avoid sharing his obsession. I did not suspect the narrator of duplicity although I noticed his manipulation on both the physical and narrative levels. He rearranges the periodicals so as to ensure Vereker's encounter with his review (282) and, despite revelations of his being humiliated and tantalized, remains in a powerful position as storyteller. Gwendolen appeared to me on first reading remarkably self-possessed, a figure paired in some obscure way with Vereker because she was also a novelist, yet as one who was too summarily dispatched by the narrator. It was not clear whether she actually exercised the power of the secret, or indeed, whether she was ever truly in possession of it. As a suspicious reader, I would have welcomed a decisive action on her part, a distinctive demonstration of her knowledge. As it is, we get the narrator's report of her luminosity and her one good line: "I don't 'review' . . . I'm reviewed" (308). If she knows the secret, she apparently derives no overt power from it other than her refusal to disclose it to the narrator.

The most intriguing questions raised during my first reading were 1) Why would lovers be more apt to discover Vereker's secret than an individual? 2) What, if anything, is James telling us about how to read his work? 3) Why is the author presented as quarry or prey? and 4) Is this a story about the author's failed intention to communicate or the critic's failure to understand? I also wondered about the connection between death and interpretation since the only characters to claim knowledge of Vereker's
secret died. What a heavy penalty to pay for knowledge! It almost makes the unendurable delay and withholding of information seem the preferable alternative.

On second reading I found myself paying more particular attention to details that I had not noticed at first. I also found that many of the same images that I thought significant on first reading intensified. I tried to puzzle out more from the names, e.g. Hugh—hew (to shape or cut down with an axe), Vereker—suggestive of truth (L. veritas)=truth shaper; Bridges as the name of Lady Jane's house; Corvick—perhaps derived from the Latin corvus meaning crow; and Gwendolen, whose name means white or pale (Chambers 162). The titles of books by Vereker and Gwendolen seemed significant. It is rather odd that Gwendolen's first two published books are mentioned by title but that her third is not. Her first novel, a trilogy written at the age of nineteen, is Deep Down. Her second novel, written after she claims possession of Vereker's secret, is Overmastered. (Who is "overmastered" by whom we may wonder.) Vereker's only work mentioned by title is The Right of Way. Perhaps the most damning name of all is the one James reserves for the critical review. He calls it The Middle. The narrator never becomes known by a name, perhaps so that the reader may more easily identify with him.

Vereker's remark "All I pretend is that the author doesn't see—... anything" made me ask why an author should feign lack of vision or sight. This led me to wonder whether this was a kind of Emperor's New Clothes phenomenon in reverse, i.e. anyone who sees anything here is wrong and a ninny. Yet the possibility that lovers could see what others might not directed my attention to Gwendolen and Corvick. On second reading the Freudian innuendoes and sexual metaphors in the transactions between Gwen and George seemed much more obvious. The narrator uses the word "tip" with special emphasis on several occasions. Vereker mentions that he does not want to give anybody "what I believe you clever young men call the tip." At the end of section IV, the narrator has tried unsuccessfully to get Vereker to reveal more. After mentioning that he was never to see Vereker again, he wonders "where he had got his tip:" The word "tip" has multiple connotations of clue, pen, and iceberg which, converging with the strong image of the father absenting himself, give this word phallic value. This suggestion is strengthened in section IX when the narrator is surprised after Corvick's death to find that Gwendolen "could come to feel the possession of a technical tip, a piece of literary experience, a counterpoise to her grief." Here the tip assuages the grief caused by Corvick's death. The untimely death of the groom during his honeymoon certainly conjures the image of passions at their peak being utterly dashed. Gwendolen's withholding of the tip is for the narrator "the
final tap on the nail that was to fix fast my luckless idea, convert it into
the obsession” (307). This time the phallic image is what forces the narr­
ator to continue at the moment when he might have renounced his
fruitless quest. The attractiveness of the secret is enhanced by both
Vereker’s and Gwendolen’s equating it to the life force in the phrases “the
organ of life” (288) and “It’s my life” (307).

Another curious image which involves the tip and other phallic imagery
is the description of how Gwendolen and George approach the problem
of discovery. George is likened to a chess player attended
by the pale but increasingly handsome Gwen who faces the ghostly form
of Vereker ((295). The game-playing image gives way to the deadly (and
phallic) hunter/quarry one in which Corvick would “bring down the animal
with his own rifle.” Gwendolen, in contrast, wants to trap Vereker,
presumably to take him alive. “She says she requires another tip.” Cor­
vick is adamant about preventing that even though he is willing to risk
going to India, during which time she might possibly get a tip from the
narrator or Vereker.

Shortly following the chess game metaphor, Gwendolen is pictured as
a gambler (298). This image of her as “of the very type . . . one had met
in the temples of chance” is very much at odds with statements which
immediately precede it. Just before, Corvick has remarked that she is “quite
incredibly literary” and the narrator, that “literature was a game of skill.”
The narrator seems to make a distinction between games of skill and games
of chance but shifts to portray Gwen as a compulsive gambler with “fixed eyes’’ who “extravagant[ly] . . . lived for the art of the pen. Her passion
visibly preyed on her, and in her presence I felt almost tepid” (298).
Now it is Gwen who, like Vereker, has become prey, albeit to her own
passion. Does she lose skilled control under this passion, and why is the
narrator “almost tepid”? Her passion either must raise his temperature
from cold to lukewarm or rob him of some of his fire (torch and flame
imagery is abundant in this quest). He looks at her first novel again. Deep
Down is found to be a “desert in which she had lost herself, but in which
too she had dug a wonderful hole in the sand—a cavity out of which Cor­
vick had still more remarkably pulled her” (298).

This brings us to the thoroughly puzzling on-again off-again engage­
ment of Gwendolen and George. At the beginning of the story she is
presumably willing and ready to marry but for her mother’s objections.
It is not clear why she would marry George or whether she is financially
self-sufficient, with or without whatever inheritance she may expect. The
narrator’s expectation that she will immediately divulge the existence of
Vereker’s secret is denied by her “ardent response [which] was in itself
a pledge of discretion” (293). George and Gwendolen’s unfettered intimacy
is very much the envy of the narrator. But he is as much puzzled as we are by the contradictions which occur in respect to whether they were engaged at the time Corvick announced his discovery. The only glimmer which comes to me is that the lovers’ intimacy is suggestive of that of a reader (critic) with a text. There is really no point to the secrecy of reading/interpretation unless it, like sexual union, involves privacy, time, engagement, and sometimes resistance. Interpretation cannot be witnessed or participated in by others; even Gwendolen and George do not succeed jointly. It is highly intuitive and comes in a flash—the gestalt or total pattern as opposed to the pieces or individual threads. Possession of the literary text as symbolized by Corvick’s marriage to Gwendolen is shortlived and in his case spelled death to the possessor. Ross Chambers sees the marriage as being Corvick’s reward for becoming the critical victor (162). He sees her as becoming vulnerable through her own desire to know Vereker’s secret and yielding herself only after he possesses it. Corvick’s own assertion that it will be Vereker who “shall crown me victor—with the critical laurel” (296) seems to locate the power struggle between Vereker and Corvick. However, Corvick’s letter promising that he will tell Gwendolen only after they are married seems to be all the persuasion that was needed for her to finally take that step (301). This is despite Corvick’s earlier insistence to the narrator that they were “not a bit engaged” (297). It seems inconsistent with her character to let curiosity tip the scale at this point. I would have liked to see her force the secret and then decide whether to marry Corvick.

Gwen’s “impregnation” with the secret leads to the highly ambiguous production of Overmastered. Overmastered by Vereker perhaps? Or has Gwendolen overmastered someone or something herself? Evidence is scant and indeterminant, nor is there explanation for her subsequent marriage to Drayton Deane after the narrator has noted her “consummate independence.” This independence seems to consist of the possession of her indomitable, incontrovertible knowledge of Vereker’s work after the latter’s death has occurred. Her remarriage signals to the narrator the possible “fruit” that will be born in the work of her husband, a reversal of the natural order. The narrator’s expectation is completely frustrated, however, for Deane’s work does not flourish, and Gwendolen’s third novel is deemed inferior to her previous work. Are we to suspect that there was no secret? Or that knowledge of the secret diminished her ability? Or that the narrator’s envy of Gwendolen simply resulted in a “sour grapes” evaluation of her work? After Gwendolen’s adamant refusal to impart the secret to the narrator, one cannot help but suspect that the exasperated narrator simply kills her for revenge, as we might drop the reading of a text that simply withheld too much. He and we are left not only with
unappeased desire for Vereker's secret but the unsettled feeling that when Gwendolen "struck light" she may have radiated and extinguished it simultaneously.

If one accepts Roland Barthes's idea of the *plaisir du texte* as being analogous to sexual pleasure, and I do, then one is justified in the expectation of *jouissance* as a result of one's pleasurable encounter with the text. When the juiciness leads nowhere, frustration and anger result, as is demonstrated by the narrator. In light of our knowledge of reader-response theory, it could be said that it is our own responsibility to achieve whatever moments of bliss are to be had—which, in fact, some readers and readings did. From my perspective it looks as if they had to manage this with precious little help from the text. Jonathan Culler would say that these diverse readings are the result not of vagueness or the various readers projecting themselves into the text, but rather "from the potential reversibility of every figure. Any figure can be read referentially or rhetorically" ("Prolegomena" 65).

Barthes insists that we recognize the distinction between *figuration* and *representation*:

> Figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears (to whatever degree and in whatever form that may be) in the profile of the text. For example: The author may appear in his text (Genet, Proust [or James]), but not in the guise of direct biography. . . . Or again: one can feel desire for a character in a novel (in fleeting impulses). Or finally: the text itself, a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites. All these movements attest to a figure of the text, necessary to the bliss of reading . . .

> Representation, on the other hand, is embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihood, readability, truth, etc.). . . . Of course, it very often happens that representation takes desire itself as an object of imitation; but then, such desire never leaves the frame, the picture; it circulates among the characters; if it is a recipient, that recipient remains interior to the fiction (consequently, we can say that any semiotics that keeps desire within the configuration of those upon whom it acts, however new it may be, is a semiotics of representation. That is what representation is: when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame: of the picture, the book, the screen). (410-11)

Though Barthes notes that "The text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures" and that "the text of bliss is never the text that recounts the kind of bliss afforded literally by an ejaculation," (409) I still feel that I have been cheated after some reasonable expectations were aroused. First, I have come to think of James as being sensitive to women and the unnecessary limitations imposed by gender in the society in which he lived, yet he makes Gwendolen a character who is never fully independent and lets her die in childbirth. I also know that he does not write
about a lot of sexually fulfilled characters. Nonetheless, the degree of withholding of information from the reader after expectations are raised in "The Figure in the Carpet" makes the task of reading unduly confusing and bewildering. It is not delay to enhance the ultimate gratification when there is no ultimate gratification. It points to the fact that James, like Vereker, in the end could not let go of his "little secret," his "organ of life." The reader who lusts after unity or the narrator's completion of the hero's task is liable to be confronted instead by a manipulative author, flashing his pen, but not to illuminate so much as to confound. Even if one sets aside the perception of unity or feeling of closure as being "old fashioned" objectives of reading, there ought to be a sense of multiple valid readings emerging. Fortunately, the other papers in this series demonstrate that this is possible. Unfortunately for me, this text stubbornly resists my (many) overtures. The multitude of unanswered questions and conflicting bits of evidence amount to a desire that circulates within the text, the figure remaining in the carpet and never leaping out.

Note

1 It is interesting to ponder the connection between a literary critic and a bird that is raucous and feeds on carrion. James had earlier named an important character in Portrait of a Lady Madame Merle. Merle means blackbird. Vereker and Madame Merle share the distinction of being polished surfaces, having no angles and both embody the shadowy dark side of human nature.
Postscript: A Weaver's Note on How Figures Get Into Carpets

Since Henry James selected "the figure in the carpet" as his metaphor for what was the essence of Vereker's writing, it is interesting to pursue it to see how it holds up when pressured with weaver's technology. To a weaver, a figure in a carpet would mean a pattern or design that could be put there in several different ways. The simplest methods would be alternations of different colored threads in either warp or weft, or both, to produce horizontal or vertical stripes or checks. Variations can produce more complicated color and weave effects.

Another simple method of producing a design is by tapestry weaving in which the structural or warp threads are completely hidden or covered by the weft. This is a hand manipulated weave allowing complex representational patterns to develop. Weavers of tapestry often work from a drawing known as a cartoon and see only the wrong side of the work as it is in progress. The surface facing the weaver sometimes becomes a dense tangle of loose hanging ends which more or less obscure the figure in the carpet. The tapestry loom is a single frame which keeps the warp threads under tension. There is minimal, or sometimes no mechanical manipulation of threads.

Another way to put a figure in a carpet is with a pile surface. This usually hides the structural warp threads and the pile may be long or short, looped or cut. Pattern will emerge when the pile surface is cut to different lengths or when cut and looped ends are arranged in designs. The threads of the pile surface can be varied in color to produce extremely intricate designs, the sort of tracery which we know in the oriental rug. When these rugs are woven by hand, the warp threads are taut on a vertical loom and the weaver inserts each short piece of yarn around two warp threads so that row by row the pile builds up. Later the surface can be trimmed to an even length or carved to enhance the pattern already established by color.

In these methods there is no mechanical action of the loom which creates pattern. That possibility does exist in more complex looms which vary the weave structure to produce intricate designs in the web or interlacement of threads. It seems likely that Henry James had in mind the oriental pile carpet or perhaps a rug woven in the tapestry technique. The design in either of these truly would be spread throughout, not localized. It would be an integral part of the structure, not a surface ornamentation. It would come into being through careful craftsmanship and much patience in adding only one tiny element (thread or word) at a time, but
only that element which belongs exactly in a certain place in the overall design. The resultant splendor would be much greater than the sum of its parts (try rearranging the words of a James sentence or paragraph for immediate proof). Thus, James chose a very apt metaphor for the complexity of language and writing, one which is still being used by theorists and literary critics. Perhaps that is because the relation is built into the language itself in words derived from the Latin textus and texere (to weave or compose). Hence, text, texture and textile have been intimates for a long, long time.

Ann Ellsworth

Works Consulted


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