

Caring for Knowledge: Transmission in “The Figure in the Carpet” and “Nona Vincent”¹

John Holland

At a moment in “The Figure in the Carpet,” the narrator, surrounded on all sides by the enigmatic aspects of art and love, is “struck” by the enthusiasm of his friend, George Corvick, concerning a question of art: “He’d call it letters, he’d call it life, but it was all one thing.”² In this essay, I seek to delineate certain aspects of James’s much-discussed preoccupation with art, its sources and its effects. In doing so, I am relying principally — but not exclusively — on certain stories that he composed during the 1890s, a period that is marked not by the certainty of someone who is hurrying to reach a conclusion, but by hesitation and doubt, a period in which he sketched out a problematic concerning these issues, while allowing himself a time for understanding and working-through.³

To Corvick’s affirmation of the oneness of life and art, one is tempted to reply that they may indeed be “one,” providing that the one consists of many parts and the relations among them are exceedingly complex. Such complexity and multiplicity can be perceived in Dencombe’s celebrated words near the end of “The Middle Years”: “We work in the dark — we do what we can — we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”⁴ In this statement, the artist expresses his sense of the impossibility of knowing the effects of what he does. Situating himself, at the beginning of the process, on the side of life, he operates upon his thoughts, submitting them to the ciphering or encrypting (*chifffrage*) required by considerations of artistic form and representability, considerations in which the working of unconscious processes have a part; they are subjected to processes that cannot quickly be understood or easily named, and are transformed thereby into black marks fixed upon a white

1 A version of the essay was presented on October 22, 2010 at the second international conference of the European Society of Jamesian Studies, “Henry James and the Poetics of Duplicity,” held at the American University in Paris.

2 James, “The Figure in the Carpet,” 242.

3 See Jacques Lacan, “Le temps logique.”; “Logical Time.”

4 James, “The Middle Years,” 105.

page.⁵ Dencombe expresses, with these words, the element of incalculability concerning what will be produced, an element that is inseparable from the very passion for producing literary texts. Art is mad because it cannot be submitted fully to a logic that would enable one to predict, from the beginning, what will be created and what its effects will be. The position of the artist is fundamentally one of uncertainty, and even of surprise, when he is confronted with the effect upon himself of the encrypting of thought into writing. In a sense, these effects are worked *on* him, for he places himself on both sides of the relation between life and art; Dencombe sees himself not only as a living being but also as the work produced, and can therefore experience the sensation, in receiving his latest novel, of “seeing one’s self ‘just out’” (78).

Part of this element of surprise is linked to the artist’s sense that the submission of thought to encrypting produces an experience of a contradiction within his own subjectivity; it gives him a sense that he is not always identical to himself. For Dencombe, this sense is felicitous, for he had, at “one or two great moments of the past,” been able to feel that he was “better than himself” (78). This experience is not always pleasant, as I have argued elsewhere, for Henry James himself; writing *Notes of a Son and Brother* near the end of his life, the task of transforming his younger “self” into the central figure of an autobiography involves a far more radical sense of self-estrangement: a feeling that, in submitting himself to representation, “I ... had to turn nothing less than myself inside-out”; in such a case, his sense of his difference from himself is to be located not on the slope of joy, but of anxiety.⁶ In both cases, the experience of submitting one’s thoughts to the requirements of artistic form produces subjective effects that could not simply have been calculated in advance.

Uncertainty, however, is the opposite of what Hugh Vereker stresses about his art in “The Figure in the Carpet.” What he had intended to achieve has been applied in a way that has “been a triumph of patience, of ingenuity,” and the result is, “the thing in life I think a bit well of myself

5 The expression, “considerations of representability,” derives from Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams (II),” 339-349. For a discussion of “*chiffre*,” see Lacan, “Introduction à l’édition allemande,” 556.

6 James, *Autobiography*, 455; Holland, “Losing Oneself: Autobiography, Memory, Vision,” 267-268.

for” (231). These statements could be taken as expressions of a certainty uncontaminated by doubt if they did not sound like the words of someone who is protesting too much; an author who has not been divided by the effect of having his thoughts pass through the process of artistic production would not necessarily have felt obliged to assert so forcefully that his intention has emerged intact in the published texts. Such insistence would not be surprising in a veteran novelist who had only recently become, as the narrator says, “the fashion” and whose response to merely clever reviews is to “feel...what a failure I am” (224, 229). He is a failure because, finally, the only way that an author can *know* about what has emerged from the process of encrypting is through the text’s effect on a reader.⁷

Whatever the source of his words may be, it remains the case that Vereker and — under his influence — the narrator, speak of what can be passed along to the reader as something that is clear and determinate, something in which nothing is lost in its transmission from author to reader. The narrator’s expression, “a complex figure in a Persian carpet,” suggests that this element can be grasped easily if only the reader surveys the work from the right distance and angle, and Vereker’s own formulation that it is “the very string that my pearls are strung on” places it as the organizing principle of his work, one that can be seen and named as easily as the “shoe” that encases a foot

⁷ The relations to knowledge described here are somewhat different from those that have been proposed in neopragmatist thought. For example, Richard Rorty argues that “the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by a special mental process, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned.” Instead, “a sufficient aim” for philosophy is to “kee[p] a conversation going”; the name of this “ability to sustain a conversation” is “wisdom” (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 6, 378.).

Jamesian transmission is likewise based upon the inability of any epistemology to ground it in certainty, but here the two problematics part company. To portray the relation between writer and reader as any kind of meaningful conversation would be to engage in question-begging: it would be to presuppose the existence of an interlocutor who is capable of grasping what is unsayable in the text. As James’s works show, nothing is less certain; it is always possible that *no one* will be able to respond. Once the very existence of any interlocutor becomes open to doubt, the procedure that Rorty urges us to approach with optimism and joy begins to seem rather more difficult and anxiety-provoking. The passage of the artist’s intention through the process of encrypting engenders a sense of doubt and tortured uncertainty about the possibility of transmitting what is most crucial to the reader; such feelings lend a profound urgency to the situation.

One may also well ask whether the term “conversation” does not, finally, place too much emphasis on conscious aspects of communication, neglecting the less tangible aspects of what enables the tigris to spring. Finally, is the word “wisdom” not fundamentally too comfortable and comforting as a description of what is transmitted? Isn’t the uncomfortable, and perhaps even destabilizing experience of dissonance transmitted to the spectator in “Nona Vincent” of an order that is too subversive for “wisdom” to accommodate?

For these reasons, I would like to suggest that the following formula can serve as one of the hypotheses of the problematic of transmission: There is no conversation.

(240, 241, 233).

These formulations differ from George Corvick's less insistent view, expressed early in the story, that the source of fascination in Vereker's work is precisely an intangible element. For him, "there was evidently in the writer's inmost art something to *be* understood," but whatever it is, it seems to resist any easy ability to name it (237). For Corvick, what lends Vereker's work its distinctive quality is that it "gives me...the sense of...something or other," the sense that "there was more in Vereker than met the eye" (221, 237). When he tries to name this characteristic, words fail him; whatever gives this work its value for Corvick lies just beyond any easy effort to delineate its contours in words. This sense of an enigma is precisely *what* these texts have succeeded in transmitting to him; what is not at all clear is *how* the texts have done so. What, for Corvick, gives its value to the text is something that cannot be localized in any of the empirically observable elements of a work. How can what cannot be said or located be transmitted to the reader?

I would like to suggest briefly that these two positions — the seeming certainty that the string holding the author's pearls together can be seen and grasped and the vague suggestion that the text's greatest source of value cannot be named — are not necessarily irreconcilable. It is not impossible to state the figure in the carpet as such, but the importance of such a figure is that it marks the place of something else, the outlines of which can be delineated, but which is nowhere represented directly. In his much later autobiography, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, the author borrows a figure from Hugh Vereker when he seeks to name the principle that has enabled him to "strin[g] th[e] apparently diverse and disordered" elements of the text "upon a fine silver thread." This thread is nothing other than James's long-cherished hope to write "The personal history...of [a] [lively] imagination" (454). The string of this particular necklace is hardly a piece of esoteric knowledge available only to the initiated; it is almost as plain to readers of the autobiography as the shoe on a person's foot. I have argued elsewhere, however, that various moments in this "history" suppose something else as the condition for the production of the text: a scene of anxiety, in which the author must confront the deformation wrought by the autobiographical form

upon his image, a deformation that is almost *unspeakable* or unwritable for him. This scene is nowhere present in the autobiography, but it serves as the absent cause of the book that is available to us, and provides James's various autobiographical reminiscences and associations with a sort of subjective ballasting that lends them much of their haunting quality.⁸

I would like to suggest that, in James's stories about art, the relation between the assertion that a determinate figure exists and the vaguer sense that there is something more in a text than meets the eye should be understood in a way that is similar to that between the "silver thread" and the unwritten scene of anxiety in James's autobiographies. The figure marks out a series of places in the text, transmitting to the reader the sense that something else is also there, without telling us what that other thing is.

How, then, can this other thing can be transmitted? Not surprisingly, it is far easier to specify how it cannot be transmitted. It is impossible, for example, to pass it along through an act of exchange, which is the means by which the narrator, at a relatively late point in the story, fancies that he can obtain it. Made desperate by his inability to discover what he has been seeking for so long, he imagines himself forced to offer "to marry Mrs. Corvick" for "the blessing of her knowledge" (265). The model for such acts of exchange — and this is not at all the only text in which such acts are proposed — is the capitalist market. According to such an action, two individuals, supposedly motivated by personal interest, would exchange two objects: in this case, the narrator considers briefly giving himself as husband in return for the secret that has supposedly been communicated to Gwendolen Corvick. Such market exchanges are founded upon

8 Holland, "Losing Oneself: Autobiography, Memory, Vision," 265-270. The expression, "absent cause," which here denotes an element of the real that resists symbolization is also used by Tzvetan Todorov, in his celebrated article on the Jamesian secret, to refer to this secret, whether or not it is capable of being said. It is worth noting that Todorov published his essay at a time when the term had already come into currency as a sort of switch point between psychoanalysis and Marxism. It is closely related to the project of the *Cercle d'épistémologie* and is connected, in particular, with Jacques-Alain Miller's concept of suture, according to which a real and inaccessible element — in this case, the subject — becomes the condition for the necessary progression of its discourse. In specifically Marxist thought, the absent cause became the starting point, among the Althusserians, of the theory of structural causality. Alain Badiou has made a complex use of the concept, while also arguing that it possesses idealist limitations. See Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 188; Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 71, 74-83; Miller, "La suture (Éléments de la logique du signifiant)," 37-49; Todorov, "The Secret of Narrative," 145. See also Bruno Bosteels' valuable history of the concept of structural causality in "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject," 220-228.

the assumption that the two objects to be exchanged are of more or less the same value; in the capitalist economy it would be money that would serve as the element by which the value of two such objects could be measured. One might well, then, ask several questions: how can the simple revelation, from the mouth of another person, of which string allows the pearls to hold together also communicate the unnameable element that is related to this string? Second, if what is unnameable provides an important element of the “value” of a work, how can this value be submitted to a quantitative measurement and be given a price? How can what takes on value because it resists being *said* be exchanged for another object because it is somehow judged to have the same price?

In examining a conception of transmission that runs counter to such exchange, James is thinking the relation between author and readers in a way that cannot be reduced to a financial transaction in which the public gives money to an author in return for obtaining a copy of a book. Such a theorization of the relation between author and reader is very far from Michael Anesko’s portrayal of a prescriptive market that keeps the artist “in touch with reality and even act[s] as a vital antidote to the potentially fatal egoism of the creative imagination.”⁹ The relation between author and reader goes beyond what Jacques Lacan called the “capitalist discourse,” in part

9 The neoliberal celebration of capitalism arrived in Jamesian studies in 1986 with the publication of Michael Anesko’s *Friction with the Market*. This book transforms James into what Michel Foucault would have called an “entrepreneur of himself” a man whose fundamental project was to attract an audience and to sell copies of his books (*Naissance de la biopolitique*, 232). In Anesko’s work, James’ reasons for writing and his working methods are rethought in terms of the ideology and procedures of the capitalist market. For example, his research for his study of Hawthorne is seen in terms of the workings of “self-interest” and miscalculations concerning the length of projected novels had “a disastrous effect on his planned economy of scale” (76, 86).

According to this way of understanding the writer’s experience, the cold, hard, and empirical realities of sales figures would seem to make the epistemological ambiguities of encrypting and transmitting fade away into nothingness. On the other hand, a certain slipperiness emerges in Anesko’s too brief discussions of the desire that would have led James into his engagement with the market. Apparently, James’s native language does not even have a name for this desire, and in order to find one, Anesko must have recourse to the French of the classical age. What impelled James was the quest for *la gloire*, “a seductive, and *elusive*, synthesis of artistic integrity, popular acclaim, and its attendant riches,” and Anesko invokes the authority of Edith Wharton to suggest, in his paraphrase, that “Anglo-Saxons had no notion of what the French mean when they speak of *la gloire*; but in this respect she felt that James was a Latin” (13, 14, my emphasis). The unsayable, having been expelled from this approach to writing and readership, returns surreptitiously when it is a matter of naming the subjective ghost in the capitalist machine. A concept whose elusiveness is signaled by the need to move back and forth between two languages and cultures serves as a stand-in for an even more problematic desire, whose nature completely escapes Anesko’s empirical approach and neoliberal assumptions. Then, in a final irony, these assumptions allow this elusive desire to be satisfied unproblematically by an object that is nothing less than the quantitative itself; James was apparently satisfied whenever he was able to sell as many books as possible.

because what is transmitted cannot easily be exchanged.¹⁰

To try to imagine a form of transmission that is not reducible to the market is a project that is fraught with problems; in terms of its logical status, such a passage from text to reader may not be impossible, but it is also certainly not necessary. Nothing can guarantee that this will occur, for a successful transmission is entirely contingent, and the best that the reader can do is to fulfill certain conditions that would render the passage more likely. Vereker speculates that Corvick's precarious love for Gwendolen Erme could be useful and Corvick engages in a prolonged immersion of himself in the author's writings, and then, ceases entirely to read them, in the hope that this practice will open up the space that would allow the elements "to spr[i]ng out at him like a tigress out of the jungle" (251).

The contingent status of literary transmission is also related to the radical ambiguity of "The Figure in the Carpet"; as critics such as Shlomith Rimmon have shown, one cannot know, at the end of the story, whether anything has been transmitted or not, and each indication that something in Vereker's work has been apprehended can be read, just as easily, as a suggestion that nothing at all has been transmitted.¹¹ I would like, however, to avoid concluding from this ambiguity that such transmission is not only not necessary, but also impossible; to do so would be to say that the text is fundamentally not ambiguous at all, since it indicates a clear choice to the reader. Instead, this ambiguity points to the contingency of the act that has been posited; it is something that *could* have taken place, but for which we have no proof that it has necessarily occurred.

One reason why it is particularly difficult to show whether or not such a transmission has occurred is that the mark of its advent would be less a specific interpretation than a change in the subjectivity of the reader. The narrator, horrified perhaps by his sense of his own impasse,

¹⁰ The capitalist discourse is a fifth discourse, which Lacan sometimes, in the early 1970s, added to the list of his four other discourses. Its implications have recently been developed in the valuable works of Pierre Bruno, *Lacan, passeur de Marx*, and Marie-Jean Sauret, *Malaise dans le capitalisme*. In presenting capitalism as establishing a new modality of the death drive, the capitalist discourse has the potential to throw a good bit of light on the subjective ghost that has escaped Anesko's grasp.

¹¹ Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity*, 95-115.

continually sees changes in those who may have been open to the secret. He seems to believe that Corvick's grasping of it reunites him with Gwendolen Erme, transforming them into what he refers to in another context as "lovers supremely united" (265). Similarly, Corvick's possible communication of this information to Gwendolen is believed to raise the quality of her writing temporarily.

What these examples point to is the most extreme of the possibilities that the narrator seems to entertain: that a successful transmission would permit a traversal of the impossibility that separates men and women, and the establishment, in the space of that impossibility, of an encounter between a particular man and a particular woman. It is also the case, of course, that in stories such as "The Middle Years," a relation of transmission can obtain between two men, yet the narrator, in his preoccupation with Corvick's connection with Gwendolen Erme, seems to go so far as to suggest that the gap between text and reader is homologous to the distance between men and women; both have at their center a space that can supposedly be crossed, and a successful transmission could enable the sexual relation — in Jacques Lacan's sense of the term — to take place.¹²

Now, this gap between men and women in James's work is a radical one, and seems to be marked by a command that a certain distance must be maintained between the sexes. Within this context, an earlier story of James's, "Nona Vincent," becomes relevant, for in this work, it is precisely the impossibility of the relation between men and women that hinders the transmission of a text. In this story, a man's inability to grasp certain aspects of a woman renders his art opaque to another woman. In exploring this triangle, the story does not seek to bridge the gap between the sexes; instead, it presents the possibility that a text's fundamental enigma lies in a heterogeneous inscription of the non-rapport between men and women.

12 For a discussion of the impossibility of the sexual relation, see the essay by Alain Badiou, "Les formules de l'Étourdit." At the end of *Encore*, Lacan suggests that, in the place of the logical impossibility of the sexual relation between men and women, there can be a contingent "rencontre" ("encounter") between a man and a woman (Lacan, *Encore*, 132; *On Feminine Sexuality*, 145.). In this seminar, Lacan approaches the logical modes of necessity and contingency by defining the former as "ce qui ne cesse pas...de s'écrire" ("that which doesn't stop...being written") and the latter as what "cesse de ne pas s'écrire" ("stops not being written"). The contingent is something that does not yet exist, but which can come into existence (59, 132; 55,145).

Nona Vincent is the main character of a play written by a young author, Allan Wayworth, a play for which his patron, Mrs. Alsager, is determined to find a producer. The figure of Nona Vincent is the the “keystone of [the] arch” of the work, and Mrs. Alsager qualifies Wayworth’s portrayal of her as exquisite and is particularly impressed by the “perfection” of the lines in which she “tells her love” (7, 8). Between the author and his patron, there flourishes a sort of love governed by the requirement that there must be a distance between the two of them, a requirement connected with the existence of a Mr. Alsager, who is “a massive personality in the City.”¹³ In this context, the homage that Wayworth has been able to render to Mrs. Alsager is to have made her the “model” of his main character; as he tells her, Nona Vincent is “a good deal like *you*.” (8)

In drama, a third element comes into play between the words written by the author and the spectator; the actors become the first readers of the text and their role is to pass it on to the audience. Violet Grey, the actress who plays the role of Nona Vincent, is not at all, however, like Miriam Rooth of *The Tragic Muse*, about whom Peter Sherringham feels that “she was always acting” and that “her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next.”¹⁴ (86). Violet Grey is unable to inhabit the role of Nona Vincent naturally or automatically, and in her attempt to grasp this character, she must call upon her own subjectivity. Nevertheless, despite her intelligence and her possession of a talent that can “play with its problem,” she does not, as Mrs. Alsager remarks to Waywort, “*see* Nona Vincent....[S]he doesn’t see the woman you meant. She’s out of it. She gives you a different person” (25).

Violet Grey’s inability to enter into this character can be imputed only in part to a relative inexperience and lack of “training”; the fundamental difficulty lies in a fact that Mrs. Alsager grasps as soon as she meets her: “She’s in love with” Wayworth, and, indeed, loves him far more deeply than he may love her (16, 17). The most that he can avow, after Mrs. Alsager has made this

¹³ James, “Nona Vincent,” 2.

¹⁴ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 188-189.

announcement, is that he does “Not yet” love the actress (17). Although the narrator of “The Figure in the Carpet” had speculated that love would enable one to grasp a hidden aspect of a text, Violet Grey’s passion for Wayworth produces the opposite effect. It is as if this love has led her to approach her part by asking a question — “What, for Wayworth, *is* a woman? — and instead of finding in Nona Vincent the answer, is confronted with an element of opacity.

Her inability to understand the character points to the problematic character of Wayworth’s relation to his art. First of all, unlike the more experienced Dencombe, he never realizes that an artist cannot grasp fully his own work. Instead, he considers himself the person who knows his work best, and believes that its fullest performance is his own reading of it to the actors, rather than their subsequent rendition of it; this reading would later seem to him to be “the best hour in the business, because it was then that the piece had most struck him as represented” (13). He feels that he has nothing to learn about the work from the actors who are being confronted with it; any questions that Violet Grey may want to ask him can teach him nothing, and can only give him the opportunity to use his knowledge to “clear up her difficulties” (14).

This naive attitude about transmission is a mark of his intoxication with his own role as creator; the result of this intoxication is that he is more attached to the characters whom he has imagined than to the “real” figures whose traits may have been incorporated into them. This attachment becomes manifest in a vision that he has on the day following Violet Grey’s disastrous performance at the premiere of the play; the figure who appears to him is Nona Vincent herself. This woman “was not Violet Grey, she was not Mrs. Alsager, she was not any woman he had seen upon earth Yet she was more familiar to him than the women he had known best, and she was ineffably beautiful and consoling” (27). The woman whom Wayworth loves more than any other is the one whom he has created; for him, the *jouissance* involved in the encrypting by which he produces his work is stronger than anything directed toward either of the two women, and has served to inhibit any attempt to ask himself what a woman is. The lack of clarity that Violet Grey’s love for him has enabled her to discern in Nona Vincent is closely related to this inhibition.

When the actress does finally apprehend something crucial about Nona Vincent, it is not because he has enlightened her, but because Mrs. Alsager herself intervenes. She goes to visit Violet Grey and something passes between the two women that transforms the latter's performance. As she later tells Wayworth, Mrs. Alsager

had tact and grace and she had goodness and beauty, and she...lighted up my imagination.

Somehow she seemed to *give* it all to me. I took it.... I kept her before me, I drank her in.... All my courage came back to me, and other things came that I haven't felt before. She was different...she was a revelation.... She kissed me when I went away and you may guess if I kissed her" (30).

To Violet Grey, in spite of Mrs. Alsager's own praise of the delicacy of the portrayal, a crucial element of the portrait was so radically lacking that she could only orient herself within the role *after* the intervention of the third term of the triangle. Violet Grey has a profoundly libidinal reaction to Mrs. Alsager's revelation of herself to her. Entranced by the beauty of the other woman, Violet Grey embraces her and seeks to incorporate a part of her into herself. Having seemingly begun her approach to Nona Vincent by asking what a woman is for Wayworth, she now reorients her position; receiving a deeper and more forceful experience of this woman than he has ever done, she is able to give an interpretation of Nona Vincent that does not necessarily coincide with his own: "For the first time, in the whole study of the part, I had *my* model — I could make *my* copy" (30, my emphasis). The actress discerns something that has not been included in Wayworth's encrypting and she is presumably able to bring some element of it into her performance.

I said at the beginning of this essay that James's stories of the 1890s are marked not by conclusions but by a willingness to take the time to understand certain possibilities and to work through aspects of a particular problematic. In that spirit, I would like not so much to conclude as to close by focusing briefly on what is transmitted to the spectator of the play's performance, a performance that is no more accessible to the reader than is the figure in Hugh Vereker's carpet.

This performance would represent the traces, transmitted into art, of two radically different experiences of the same woman. The spectator would witness both Wayworth's exquisite words and also something in Violet Grey's performance that could not be localized in any of the words to which she gives voice, something that would radiate out from them as their penumbra. In the distinction between these two traces, we find not the bridging of the gap between men and women, as the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet" had hoped, but, rather, something like an asymmetric inscription of a radical difference between men's and women's psyches.

This inscription is not located in the action of the play — in the rapport between Nona Vincent and the male character whom she loves — but in the relation between the words and something in the performance that exceeds them, but which could not be conveyed without them: the voice that enacts them. The play thus presents us with the glimpse of a text in which what could be transmitted to the reader is precisely the gap between the word and the voice, a gap that inscribes the impossibility at the heart of our subjectivity. One of the tasks of the later fiction would be to develop ways of presenting this gap more fully and of exploring its ramifications.

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