

# The Sound of the “Right Letter”: An Attempt at Deciphering “The Figure in the Carpet”

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“The Figure in the Carpet” was first published in installments in two issues of *Cosmopolis*, starting from the very first one, in January 1896 (it was an experimental “International Revue,” published simultaneously in Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Amsterdam and New York, with original texts printed in English, French and German). The first installment of James’s short story followed the last, unfinished novel by Robert Louis Stevenson (*Weir of Hermiston*) and a historical paper on the origins of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and was preceded by a critical appraisal of the last published novel by Thomas Hardy (*Jude the Obscure*), written by Edmund Gosse.<sup>1</sup> In his self-advertisement, the French co-editor (Armand Colin) stressed several times the importance of living languages. He pointed out that not only was the latest paper addressed especially to those who read in foreign languages, “qui lisent les langues étrangères” (1) but that also those who read only in one living language, “qui ne lisent qu’une langue vivante” (2) could profit from some 200 pages of the text available to them. Generally speaking,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James was a friend of Stevenson and frequent visitor at his house Skerryvore, as documented in *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson*.

the *novellas* and short stories published every month in one of the three languages were supposed to serve as models to study the most important living languages: “de fournir les plus parfaits modèles qui peuvent servir à l’étude des principales langues vivantes” (2).

The title of the paper was a clear allusion and sort of *homage* to the French writer Paul Bourget and his novel *Cosmopolis* (1892). Bourget, a friend and a disciple of Henry James, came at the end of August 1895 to Torquay with his wife Minnie to spend a month with James, who highly enjoyed the conversations with his French colleague: “Bourget’s mind is in the real solitude in which I live, beneath what has been so much social chatter, a flowering oasis in conversational sands” (L 19, to William James, September 30, 1895). The following August, when the Bourgets came for two days to London, they dined on both nights with James, one of which at the generous invitation of Fernand Ortman, the editor of *Cosmopolis* (L 34, to Edmund Gosse, August 28, 1896).<sup>2</sup> Even if these two occasions, on James’s part, “were not as rich in incident and emotion as poetic judgement demanded” (L 34), Minnie and Paul Bourget remained for James, until their divergence of opinions over the Dreyfus case and even for some years after, participants in numerous conversations. One of the reasons for their reciprocal pleasure is to be found, according to Adeline R. Tintner, in a complex mixture of the general cosmopolitan attitude of both writers, combined with their criticism of some aspects of that very attitude within their respective societies.

The title of Henry James’s story in *Cosmopolis* was most probably taken from “Miss Grief” (1880) by Constance Fenimore Woolson, the American author and Henry James’s friend, who fell from a window in Venice in 1894. Woolson’s story reads like an anticipation of the central problem of “The Figure in the Carpet,” that of the incomprehension of a writer shown by the critics and his longing for an ideal reader, able to fully grasp his literary intention. The heroine of Woolson’s story, a bizarre aspiring female writer, comes to a renowned novelist and recites in front of him one of his works, all of which she knew by heart. The recital involves a conversation between two characters, particularly important for the author and strangely neglected by his readers:

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between James and Ortman, whom he calls on one occasion “an old acquaintance,” see: Ferguson (295). For a recent analysis of the *Cosmopolis* as a “diplomatic platform” for different forms of cosmopolitanism see: Van Dam 179. For Van Dam “The Figure in the Carpet” is “an allegory of reading as much as it is an allegory on diplomacy” (183), but also “a rewarding case study from a theoretical point of view” (184).

Her very voice changed, and took, though always sweetly, the different tones required, while no point of meaning, however small, no breath of delicate emphasis which I had meant, but which the dull types could not give, escaped an appreciative and full, almost overfull, recognition which startled me. For she had understood me—understood me almost better than I had understood myself. It seemed to me that while I had labored to interpret, partially, a psychological riddle, she, coming after, had comprehended its bearings better than I had, though confining herself strictly to my own words and emphasis. ("Miss Grief" 641)

The recitation of the original text is here opposed to the printed version ("the dull types"); the author's "words and emphasis" come back to him in their full meaning through the voice of the lady as an unexpected riddle, the solution of which eludes him.

"The Figure in the Carpet" explores on different levels the acoustic aspect of human communication. The unnamed narrator describes a sort of speechlessness in the very first sentence of the text, mentioning that George Corvick was "breathless and worried" (C 41), when he came to ask the narrator a service which was to become his new beginning: "my real start" (C 41).<sup>3</sup> Further, he describes the proposal he obtained to review the latest book by the famous writer, Hugh Vereker, in terms that combine a religious, theological notion with a sensual feeling of seizure: "There was almost rapture in hearing it proposed to me" (C 41). The last part of the conversation between the two critics is punctuated by the theme of speaking and of the distribution of roles. Corvick advises: "Speak of him, you know, if you can, as *I* should have spoken of him ... he gives me a pleasure so rare; the sense of—he mused a little—'something or other'" (C 42). The narrator wonders: "The sense, pray, of what?" Corvick insists: "My dear man, that's just what I want *you* to say!" (C 42). The next sentence is, acoustically speaking, a pregnant one: "Even before Corvick had banged the door I had begun, book in hand, to prepare myself to say it" (C 42).

Having published his review, the narrator has an opportunity to meet Vereker at a social gathering. Assuming that the writer has read his review, he is all ears to hear some words of thanks: "I had not yet caught in his talk the faintest grunt of a grudge—a note for which my young experience had already given me an

<sup>3</sup> In order to stress the importance of *Cosmopolis* as a point of departure in the study of living languages, all quotations from "The Figure in the Carpet" are taken from this edition.

ear" (C 43). His expectations are disappointed: "I had on my tongue's end, for my own part, a phrase or two about the right word at the right time; but later on I was glad not to have spoken, ..." (C 44). The hostess, Lady Jane, brings a copy of the paper, unconsciously echoing the formula used by Corvick: "'Some sweet little truths that needed to be spoken,' I heard her declare ..." (C 44). And she persuades, almost forces, Vereker to read the review in question. The result is quite devastating for the young critic, who listens avidly: "and while I strained my ear for his reply I heard him, to my stupefaction, call back gaily, his mouth full of bread: 'Oh, it's all right—it's the usual twaddle!'" (C 45). This verdict gives a taste of the main theme of the story, that of incomprehension.

George Corvick and his fiancée, Miss Gwendolen Erme, are involved in the search for something that can be contained in a letter; according to the narrator: "Vereker's own statement to me was exactly that the 'figure' *would* go into a letter" (C 376).<sup>4</sup> Corvick goes on a professional trip to India and from there he sends, instead of an awaited letter, a telegram, containing only two words: "Eureka. Immense" (C 375). "Eureka" is an exclamation. Also, the letter that follows is preceded by some acoustic effects: "late one day I heard a hansom rattle up to my door with the crash engendered by a hint of liberality" (C 377). This sounds like an announcement of a fearful message in a Greek tragedy. The message itself is short and almost audible, recalling the form of a haiku: "Just seen Vereker—not a note wrong. Pressed me to bosom—keeps me a month" (C 377). This right "note" is an annunciation, a promise, as the next letter from Corvick reveals, that "he'd tell her after they were married exactly what she wanted to know" (C 378).

George Corvick, his fiancée and the narrator (not to mention the generations of readers) are looking for a clue that would fit into a letter and into a marriage. But what if Vereker was thinking not about a letter sent in an envelope but about a letter as a part of the alphabet? Such a solution had already been proposed in the text of "The Figure in the Carpet," namely when the narrator launched the hypothesis "Perhaps it's a preference for the letter P!" (C 51) and gave some examples of potential alliterations: "Papa, potatoes, prunes—that sort of thing?" (C 51). Vereker's answer was ambiguous: "he only said I hadn't got the right letter" (C 51).

Among all the letters of the English alphabet at least two have gained independent personal meaning: *I* and *U*. The former stands for the first

<sup>4</sup> In the book version James replaced "go" with "fit."

person singular, the latter for the second person singular or plural. *I* would qualify for Walt Whitman, the author of "Song of Myself," but not for Henry James. *U*, on the other side, representing *You*, *The Other*, fulfills also the second aspect, connected with the notion of a marriage, of a union between two persons. Corvick's telegram combines both: "Eureka" represents *U*, the solution of the enigma, while "Immense," with a capital *I*, stands for the signature, as the narrator comments: "That was all—he had saved the cost of the signature" (C 375). The frequency of the letter *u* in "The Figure in the Carpet" is about 2.89, slightly above the average for the English language. But in some significant passages it increases rapidly, for instance in the description of Corvick's triumph at his discovery: "He was magnificent in his triumph, he described his discovery as stupendous; but his ecstasy only obscured it—there were to be no particulars till he should have submitted his conception to the supreme authority," (C 376, my italics) it is 5.71, almost twice (1.98) as much. The letter *u* occurs in the word "Figure" of the title of the short story, where one might expect the noun *pattern*. We are left with the impression that it had to contain a *u* since *u* as *you*, the second person singular or plural, is in fact a figure. *U* appears also in a phrase, used by Vereker to describe his secret formula—"It's the very string," he said, "that my pearls are strung on!" (C 55), not only in the transformation of the noun *string* into the verb *strung*, but also in the implied image of a string of pearls, that, seen from the front, recalls the letter *U*.

In a series of comparisons, given by Vereker: "The thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe" (C 50), the shape of the letter *U* seems inscribed in all four of them. Inverted *U* is the shape of a typical bird-cage. Fishing hooks are usually shaped like the letter *U* with one arm longer. In mouse-traps the metal part is nowadays usually rectangular, but at the end of the XIX century it used to be like a *U*—as in the 1879 patent for an "Animal-Trap" by J. M. Keep, with a "pivoted jaw" (1), or in the 1894 patent for an "animal trap" by W. C. Hooker, with "a spring-actuated jaw" (1). The image of a foot inside a shoe also recalls the shape of the letter *U*. In all four similes, true, the *U*-shapes seem to play a secondary role. A bird is more visible than his cage, a piece of cheese as well as a bait more attractive than a trap or a hook, a foot more important than a shoe. That could be explained by the interrelation between *U/You* as an object of love and attention, and *I/Myself*, or the person who has to make the choice and to pronounce: "You!"

Besides that, the letter *u* appears once, sometimes twice, in almost all of the unexpected words used by Henry James in this story. Here are some examples, in alphabetical order: beguiled, commensurate, convolution, a rare dunce, our gregarious walk, grunt of a grudge, lucubrations, the lustre of the article, manoeuvre, obtuseness, ormolu tables, portraiture, secousse, succor, surreptitious. Two of these words seem particularly interesting. *Dunce* as a sort of an ambivalent insider's joke: it denotes nowadays a dumb or lazy pupil, singled out by a conical hat with a big letter *D* written on it, but the origins of the word reach far back into the Middle Ages, to the person of the philosopher John Duns Scotus, when such a hat was a sign of outstanding wisdom. Similarly, the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet" oscillates between the satisfaction derived from having written an intelligent review and the humiliating admission of his own inability to solve Vereker's enigma. The other word is *ormolu*, which refers to a technique of gilding a solid surface, mostly made of bronze, with gold. The literal sense of the French expression "or moulu" is melted gold. This evokes the phraseological notion of a melted heart. And Vereker speaks about his secret: "Well, you've got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling?" (C 50). Apart from that, ormolu tables usually have cabriole legs that, taken upside down, form two pairs of the letter *U*.

There are two *u's* in the Latin quote, used by Miss Gwendolen Erme to comment on the discovery made by George Corvick: "Vera incessu patuit dea!" (C 375). This passage from the *Aeneid* (Book I, line 405) speaks about a recognition of the goddess Venus by her gait. Ezra Pound was to use it again, slightly modified, in a poetical description of his own meeting with Henry James in London, soon after 1908, in the seventh of his *Cantos*. According to William Pratt,

James quite deftly implies, that "the figure in the carpet" will be seen as clearly as the figure of the goddess by those who have eyes. Thus, in his first clear description of Henry James, Pound was paying tribute to James paying tribute to Virgil—a kind of double allusion that honored both writers at once—and was at the same time aligning himself with James, since neither Pound nor James easily displayed 'the figure in the carpet' in their works. (149)

The concept of the letter *U* as *You*, the second person pronoun, and of the relationship between the pronouns *I* and *You* is undoubtedly characteristic

of most of the works of Henry James. It reminds one of the basic ideas of the philosophical book *Ich und Du* (*I and Thou*), published seven years after the death of Henry James, by the great Jewish thinker, who attended a Polish high school in Lwów, Martin Buber. In that book Buber makes a direct connection between the notion of another person *You* and the eternal *Thou*.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of Woolson's "Miss Grief" an aunt of the heroine accuses the narrator and all male figures of the literary world: "And as to who has racked and stabbed her, I say you, you—YOU literary men!" (654). In "The Figure in the Carpet" this *U/You* is not an accusation but an affirmation. It should be understood rather as an echo of *You*, that opens two great commandments of Christianity: "*You* shall love the Lord *your* God with all *your* heart and with all *your* soul and with all *your* mind. ... *You* shall love *your* neighbor as *yourself*" (Matthew 22.35-40, my italics).

The *U* in "The Figure in the Carpet" is not material, like a letter printed on paper—it is immaterial, ideal, a sound that conveys a meaning. One of the interpreters of the story suggested that "the clue is to look at Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*" (Wilson 143).<sup>6</sup> This is an ambiguous lead, because Henry James in his booklet on Hawthorne was at one point highly critical, categorically rejecting the "idea of the mystic *A* which the young minister finds imprinted upon his breast and eating into his flesh, in sympathy with the embroidered badge that Hester is condemned to wear" (*H* 113) and especially the scene when the minister, looking upwards, seems to behold there "the appearance of an immense letter": that was for him going too far, almost "crossing the line that separates the sublime from its immediate neighbor" (*H* 115).

There is, however, a place in James's book on Hawthorne, which gives a clue to the interpretation of "The Figure in the Carpet" proposed here, namely the recollection of the first encounter, as a boy, with *The Scarlet Letter*: "He was too young to read it himself, but its title, upon which he fixed his eyes as

<sup>5</sup> The subject was apparently approached in a Chinese paper by Wei-dong Cao: "Drawing upon the insights of 'I' and 'Thou' proposed by Martin Buber in his book *I and Thou*, the present article considers Henry James's novels within the narrative of dialogism, where love is perceived to be a mutual growing up" (Abstract).

<sup>6</sup> One of his main arguments was the following: "The most symbolic character in *The Scarlet Letter* is named Pearl. Given that Vereker says that he has shouted hints into the faces of critics all his career and that they have always remained blank-faced, does Vereker say that the idea is the string on which 'I string *my* pearls' in order to imply a contrast to Hawthorne's Pearl?" (143-44).

the book lay upon the table, had a mysterious charm. He had a vague belief, indeed, that the *letter* in question was one of the documents that come by the post, and it was a source of perpetual wonderment to him that it should be of such an unaccustomed hue" (*H* 107). This recollection of the double meaning of the word *letter* could suggest, almost half a century later, the use of the same homonymous device in "The Figure in the Carpet."

In order to check the U-interpretation let us confront it now with a theoretical frame, developed in the works of J. Hillis Miller. He is an author of a relatively early (1980) interpretation of the short story in question, expanded later on in his book *Reading Narrative* (1992). This interpretation is based on the notion of unreadability, defined as "the generation by the text itself of a desire for the possession of the *logos*, while at the same time the text itself frustrates this desire" ("Figure" 113).<sup>7</sup> James's story is, according to this interpretation, organized by a chain of interpersonal relations.

Among later books of J. Hillis Miller two are devoted to the speech acts in literature—generally and in the case of Henry James. Even if "The Figure in the Carpet" is conspicuously absent from the latter, it seems worth trying to apply Miller's theory of speech acts to this story. In *Speech Acts in Literature* J. Hillis Miller evokes some 1992 and 1993 Derrida seminars, during which the French philosopher claimed that "Je t'aime" is "a performative, not a constative utterance" (*Speech Acts* 134). The same can be said about *U/You* as a declaration of feelings, as a performative act in choosing a life partner. In *Literature as Conduct* J. Hillis Miller provides in every chapter examples of the use of speech acts in the works of Henry James that give us a clue to understanding "The Figure in the Carpet." Perhaps the most obvious of these is the chapter devoted to *The Wings of the Dove*, with the detailed analysis of the phrase "There you are." J. Hillis Miller questions every single element of this phrase, asking: "You. Who? You as the particular person to whom the assertion is addressed, or the universal 'you,' as in an idiom like 'You never know'? The 'you' at once names the person addressed and generalizes that you by making him or her subject to a universal and universalizing force: 'There you are'" (*Literature* 196). And again: "In order to say 'There you are,' there must be a *Mitsein*, a being together. Uttering it is a violence done to the other, a triumph of the

<sup>7</sup> The idea of unreadability is borrowed from Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, as Hillis Miller himself admits (*Reading Narrative* 43); the expanded version of "The Figure in the Carpet" is here reprinted as Chapter 7 (84-106).



performative will" (197). *U/You* in "The Figure in the Carpet," similarly, is at the same time a particular person, to whom this utterance is addressed, and the universal *You/Thou* as in the Great Commandments or in the philosophy of Martin Buber. It is certainly also a triumph of the performative will.

The discussion of the meaning of Vereker's conundrum by now spans a period of some 123 years. It can be roughly divided into two groups. The first one is exemplified by a letter of Ford Madox Ford to Henry James and the latter's answer dated July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1899, included in Ford's essay on Henry James in *Portraits from Life*, published in 1937, and of T. S. Eliot's search for a Jamesian "figure in the carpet" in Kipling in his 1941 essay on the author of *Kim*, as well as of numerous other attempts to identify the figure with this or that object.

The second group of interpretations, beginning with Shlomith Rimmon (1977) and Tzvetan Todorov (1977), and continuing with David Liss under the auspices of C. S. Pierce (1995), deals with the concept of ambiguity. A whole book was published in 1987 by "an Ordinary Reader," under the name of Benjamin Newman, authored or co-authored by Rosaline Intrater (1925-2010) and entitled *Searching for the Figure in the Carpet in the Tales of Henry James*. A twenty-two page long chapter is devoted to "The Figure in the Carpet," without, however, unveiling the secret, or rather: obscuring it by the predominance of the notion of death.

Ali Taghizadeh in his deconstructivist reading of "The Figure in the Carpet" comes to the conclusion, that "the theme of the story is its narrativity" and that it "render[s] meaning indeterminable" (1929). A similar interpretation appeared in 2013, surprisingly enough, in a paper on "The New Millennium and the Age of Terror." Florin Oprescu argues here that "The Figure in the Carpet" proposes "an essential metaphor," in the sense that "the figure in the carpet contains a message that has no secrets." The illusion of this metaphor is supposed to be "part of the authentic play of literature and art" (62). For Matthew Sussman "The Figure in the Carpet" is "a proleptic satire on the ambiguity tradition" but at the same time "this anachronism is consistent with the normative conception of criticism that can be inferred from James's work" (11).

Other authors propose a single letter solution of the Vereker enigma. Peter W. Lock was a partisan of *V*, writing about a "subtly playful tissue of signifiers beginning with the letter V (Vera, Vishnu, Velázquez, Vandyke, and by immediate suggestion, Virgil, Venus, vulva, victor)," arguing these elements form "the signifiers in a system of connotations which may be seen as composing a semantic field associated with the secret figure of the text"

(171). Samuel Weber proposes considering the letter *P*, which might signify “the *organ of life* that figures the fantasmatic object of narcissistic desire: the penis or phallus.” Raymond J. Wilson summarizes their attempts as follows: “Lock’s opting for ‘V’ enables him to suggest a buried symbolism of ‘the vulva,’ whereas Weber’s suggestion of ‘P’ (despite Vereker’s saying that ‘P’ is not correct) allows Weber to read an implied symbolism of ‘the penis or phallus’” (151n).

Neither the intertextual *A*, as in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, nor the sexual *P* or *V*, signifying admittedly very important but nonetheless simply parts of the body, could reasonably be considered equivalent to life or called “immense.” From all the 26 letters of the English alphabet these conditions are met only by *U*, considered as an equivalent of the second person singular, an exclamation of acceptance and an affirmation of the chosen person.

Parker Tyler speaks about “James’s waggish and discreetly blasphemous play on the metaphor of the Immaculate Conception” (40), and connects it with the notion of pregnancy and of childbearing.<sup>8</sup> The same metaphor can be used with the *U*-interpretation, without the blasphemy. Gwendolen’s telegram to Corvick, “Angel, write” and other allusions to the Immaculate Conception, suggested by Tyler, can be interpreted as signals of the importance of oral communication, of the very act of announcing to the chosen one our interest and care. But I would contend that it’s the *U*, or *You*, or *Thou*—that the angel addresses to the Virgin Mary that is here especially important.

Coming back to “The Figure in the Carpet,” let us examine the proposed solution of Vereker’s conundrum from the point of view of its aural dimension. True, *U* is a letter, a graphic sign, which appears in the word “Eureka” and which marks abundantly, much above the average frequency, several key passages of the text. But on the other hand *U* acquires additional meaning when spoken, thanks to its homonymy with *you*, with the second person pronoun. In this way *u* becomes a personal *you* through the act of speaking. A “dead” letter becomes a “living” sound, a spoken message. Vereker formulated it: “What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the element of life” (*C* 50). Miss Erme, who received the secret from her first husband Corvick, echoes him in a conversation with the narrator, who reports: “she exclaimed in a voice that I hear at this hour: “It’s my *life!*” (*C* 385).

<sup>8</sup> Tyler’s friend, Charles Boultenhouse, was at that time working on his first film, *Henry James’ Memories of Old New York*.

The word "Eureka," used by Corvick to announce his discovery and to share his joy, is basically also an exclamation, an interjection, allegedly used first by Archimedes. The letter *u*, used profusely by Henry James in his text, is merely a hint, a clue. In order to make it work one has to pronounce it, to exclaim it in front of another person or another being. A written *u* is a sign, a spoken "You!" is a declaration of love, a promise and a program for life. In *One Thousand and One Nights* a prince buys a flying carpet in order to move to India. In Henry James's story George Corvick is sent, as "a fine flight of fancy" (C 373) of his brother-in-law to India to find there the solution of Vereker's enigma. By exclaiming "Eureka!" and "You!" to his fiancée, he is letting the figure in the carpet speak.

The U-interpretation seems to connect two general schools of interpreting "The Figure in the Carpet". It proposes a concrete meaning of Vereker's riddle—the letter *U* as a graphic equivalent of the performative utterance *You*—but at the same time this *You* is universal, it leaves many possibilities open, it allows several concretizations, including metaphysical ones. *U* solves the enigma and at the same time remains enigmatic.

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