

## ***'The Figure in the Carpet': psychoanalysis and ways of reading.***

### **Abstract**

Henry James's novella *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896) offers an ironic commentary on the failure of the literary critic or reader to fully establish the writer's intentions. Drawing on Winnicott's early interest in the work of James as well as Laplanche's theory of the enigmatic signifier, I consider what James's tale might have to tell us about reading as the cultural site of encounter with the message of the writer. After discussing how literature both provokes and inspires the reader, I extend my field of inquiry to that class of literature we call psychoanalytic theory, reflecting on the unfavourable reception of Winnicott's (1952) paper '*Anxiety associated with insecurity*'. I suggest that both Winnicott and James share an interest in the notion of 'creative reading' and that reading can be understood as a place of being alone in the presence of the writer. I conclude by considering some parallels between the figure of the literary critic and the psychoanalyst, offering some brief thoughts about the implications for creativity.

### **Introduction**

In an interview with Michael Neve in 1983, Claire Winnicott discusses how her husband Donald went straight from university in Cambridge to working as the medical officer in charge on a destroyer in the Navy during the First World War. At one point suggesting that Winnicott, a first year medical student at the time, may have known very little about the job, she confides, almost as an aside: '*He had a lot of free time and read the novels of Henry James, as far as I can tell, most of the time. He had a lot of time for reading*'. It is not altogether surprising that the middle-class, well-educated Winnicott would have a lot of time for reading, but as psychoanalysts we might want to pause for a moment to imagine why he appears to have been drawn to a writer such as Henry James. Was it simply James's supreme concern with the passage from innocence into adulthood and the painful and costly problems encountered on the path to emotional maturity? Certainly as a psychoanalyst in the making, Winnicott was to develop this same theme in his theoretical writing throughout his life, charting in great and imaginative detail the infant's journey from absolute dependence on maternal care to relative independence based on a hard-won capacity to be alone.

Be that as it may, the imaginative fiction of Henry James has often been considered a particular source of interest for psychoanalysts, with Rivkin (2007) pointing out that James, whilst a '*genius of consciousness is also – and necessarily – the genius of the unconscious*' (p. 59). Certainly, James's writing can be seen to index a preoccupation akin to Freud's with a kind of 'doubling' of the mind; a fascination with how the mind's surface or consciousness acts as barometer of that which remains unseen below. Like the early Freud, James was to become increasingly interested in the eloquence of the unsaid; the way not being able to notice, understand or speak about something can lend it additional psychic weight. In his well-known labyrinthine literary style and complex syntactical constructions conveying the most fine-grained and nuanced of meanings, James imbues his protagonists' tendency to erasure and omission with enormous cumulative emotional force. Indeed, the phenomenology of a confused, partial and limited understanding is frequently deployed by James as necessary foil to his authorial mastery of allusion, nuance, hint and suggestion. It is surely not a coincidence that these are literary skills Winnicott was himself to adopt in his own, highly

idiosyncratic way, nor that he became, like James, capable of provoking considerable exasperation in his readers. If James's literary style is often considered overly rarefied and abstruse, readers of Winnicott too are often frustrated and baffled by his enigmatic, paradoxical way of expressing himself, leading Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) to argue that he *'entices, baffles and provokes his readers, valuing them highly but never confronting them directly'* (p. 190).

If Winnicott valued his readers, so did James who claimed in 1908: *'In every novel, the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite the labour'* (p. 18). *'Making the reader'* seems to involve the writer's ability to incite a level of interest or curiosity that sets the reader off on the task of what Emerson, before James, once called *'creative reading'*. Creative, or close, attentive reading, for James, was central to an appreciation of his work and deemed interchangeable with what he calls the *'supremely beneficent'* art of literary criticism, something he thought demanded a *'rare cluster of qualities'*: curiosity, sympathy, and *'perception at the pitch of passion'* (p. 264). At its best, criticism for James implied the potential presence and attention of the kind of ideal reader he hoped his writing would produce. The Jamesian reader is one who above all has to do *'quite the labour'*, straining to appreciate the highly-wrought articulation of shades and textures of feelings and thoughts that have rarely been expressed in writing or perhaps even been experienced at all.

But James was distressed to find that appreciation of his work was not always forthcoming. After the humiliating failure of his play *'Guy Domville'*, he had been left acutely depressed by his encounter with what he called the *'great flat foot of the public'* and shortly afterwards set to work on a series of stories he was later to bring together in Volumes XV and XVI of the New York Edition, each of which was concerned with what he called *'the troubled artistic consciousness'* (Vol XV, p. xiii). One of the first of these was *'The Figure in the Carpet'* written in 1896, James's plea for the kind of sensitive criticism that could *'reinstate analytic appreciation...so far as possible, in its virtually forfeited rights and dignities'* (1934/2011 p. 228). His story offers an ironic – and wickedly funny – riff on the failure of literary critics and all professional commentators to understand what the writer is trying to do and has since been read and re-read by a series of fascinated critics in a flood of essays, criticism and counter-criticism serving both to mime and respond to James's fable. Zabel (1958) argues that the tale is *'a virtual paradigm of James's notion of the creative mystery'* (p. 20) whilst Levy (1962) tells us that it is *'one of the most bewildering of James's fictions'* (p.457). Rimmon (1977) claims that the story is fundamentally uncertain in meaning, and certainly it is one that is bafflingly enigmatic, attracting multiple ambiguous readings even whilst the text itself seems deliberately to provoke the reader – as dramatized by the luckless narrator in the story – to establish a single, conclusive interpretation. Perhaps for this reason, the story is regarded by Hardy (1988) as a *'trap baited for critics and James's revenge on the reviewers'* (p. 87).

James's artistic capacity to provoke the reader to *'do quite the labour'* in this particular story is certainly startling and it is precisely in his capacity to provoke and incite the reader to make something of what he or she is reading that I think James's relationship with Winnicott lies. In this paper, I want to explore what might seem an unlikely kinship between these two writers who, along with the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, seem to be fascinated with how we continually and creatively absorb, rework and revise aspects of our external reality, including the books we read. I hope to elucidate some of what I see as their shared concerns and to find out not only how James's

ideas might be useful to us as readers of psychoanalysis but also how psychoanalytic theory might thicken and illuminate our understanding of James's ideas about reading. This attempt is not without problems however and I am aware of the need to tread softly on the somewhat fraught relationship that is often said to exist between psychoanalysis and literature. Felman (1977) suggests the problem for this relationship lies precisely in its conjunctive 'and' which implies what she calls a relationship of 'subordination' (p. 5) between the two fields. Psychoanalysis traditionally talks 'about' literature, she argues, exerting power and authority by claiming an interpretative priority to which literature must submit. The ensuing Hegelian fight for recognition enacts a master-slave dialectic that leaves the specificity, qualities and function of literature unrecognised by psychoanalysis. Of course, the use of psychoanalysis as a conceptual system to 'read' literature has not only come to give certain types of psychoanalytic literary criticism a bad name, but also sustains a fantasy about rival claims to authority that I am anxious to avoid in this paper. Instead, I hope to develop a dialogue between the two domains rather than privileging any one 'reading' over another, and to consider how three very different writers might mutually inform and generate implications for each other.

I want to start by offering a brief outline of *The Figure in the Carpet*, though I must recognise from the outset the impossibility of summarising such a complex, highly-wrought and profoundly ambiguous fable. However, I will use my summary as a basis for thinking about James's tale in tandem with the work of the French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche, focusing on his ideas about the enigmatic signifier and its relationship to culture. Along the way, I will also draw on Winnicott's characteristic way of reading and writing psychoanalytic theory, developing my thoughts about reading as a site of encounter with the message of the writer or artist. I will conclude with a brief consideration of the parallels between the figure of the literary critic and the psychoanalyst and their shared concern with promoting and sustaining creativity.

### **The Figure in the Carpet**

James's tale is told through the eyes of a nameless narrator, an ambitious young literary critic of doubtful competence who is attending a weekend house party. He is rather pleased with a review he has recently published of the latest novel written by the well-known writer Vereker. He is both delighted and nervous to discover that Vereker has been invited too, and hopes that the writer will have read his piece. During the party, a guest produces the review for comment and Vereker, not realising that the reviewer is also a guest, dismisses it as '*the usual twaddle*'. He later apologises to the narrator and agrees to meet him, claiming that neither he nor anyone else has yet seen the '*exquisite scheme*' at work in all his books.

At their meeting, Vereker tries to explain the nature of his scheme:

*'It's the finest fullest intention of the lot, and the application of it has been, I think, a triumph of patience, of ingenuity.....It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps someday constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it. So it's naturally the thing for the critic to look for'*.

James's slow-witted narrator becomes increasingly confused in trying to understand what Vereker means. He wonders whether it is some kind of '*esoteric message*', but Vereker responds, crushingly,

*'Ah, my dear fellow, it can't be described in cheap journalese'*. And so the hunt is on for the Figure, something that is both observable and yet unseen:

*'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 [...]. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma'*.

Perhaps it is like Vereker himself, of whom, James tells us, *'there was more....than met the eye'*. For the secret seems to involve depth as well as surface; it cannot be seen though it can be experienced. This tantalising paradox pervades the entire novella, where the visible surface or form of the Figure merely indexes a radical absence of which the visible is but a sign. The ever-present absence conveyed by James conveys suggests that the putative existence of the Figure itself is perhaps less important than the way in which various characters in the novella subsequently choose to search for it. Two protagonists join the narrator in his relentless search for Vereker's secret. We are told that George Corvick, the narrator's editor, *'followed the chase for which I myself had sounded the horn'*, as well as the writer, Gwendolen Erme, with whom Corvick has a romantic understanding despite her mother's disapproval. Learning from the narrator that Corvick too is trying to access his *'exquisite scheme'*, Vereker hints that marriage might help him work it out. Indeed, for Corvick and Gwendolen *'literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life'*. The narrator is not only envious of the way Corvick is able to *'excite himself over a question of art'*, but of how both he and Gwendolen make their pursuit of the Figure a central part of their intimate lives together. Meanwhile, the celibate narrator struggles on alone, convinced he will discover the *'buried treasure'*.

In his portrayal of the relationships between these three main characters, we can discern James's interest in several central themes. Firstly, we are offered an ironic commentary not simply on the different ways of understanding a novel or text, but rather on the possibility of different ways of reading; a difference incarnated in his portrayal of the sexually mature, generous and sophisticated Corvick on the one hand, and his baffled, naïve and celibate narrator on the other. From the outset, the narrator's personal limitations and inexperience are pitted against Corvick's *'supersubtlety'*. Whilst the narrator becomes increasingly frustrated by his inability to *'get at'* Vereker, Corvick who is also fascinated by the literary enigma posed by Vereker, has an aesthetic appreciation that the narrator starts to realise he lacks. *'I was freshly struck with my colleague's power to excite himself over a question of art'* muses the narrator. *'He'd call it letters, he'd call it life, but it was all one thing'*. In pursuit of the Figure, however, it is clear that the narrator doesn't actually spend much time reading at all. Instead, he makes a greedy and increasingly futile grab at Vereker's novels, trying to absorb what he imagines is their meaning as quickly as possible: *'Returning to town I feverishly collected them all; I picked out each in its order and held it up to the light. This gave me a maddening month....'* His ill-fated attempt is soon given up however, and James instead tells us about a quite different way of reading in his portrayal of the relationship between Corvick and Gwendolen. The couple become increasingly involved in reading Vereker and it is clear that not only do they do so more slowly and thoughtfully, but also that the act of reading is for them a joint activity: *'They did as I had done, only more deliberately and sociably, - they went over their author from the beginning. There was no hurry. Corvick said the future was before them and the fascination could only grow; they would take him page by page....inhale him in slow draughts and let him sink all the way in'*. This

slow absorption of Vereker's work, a refusal to hurry, and the generative quality of close, attentive reading that promises a future yield are all aspects of reading that James points to as significant.

Secondly, it is clear that James wants us to understand that the sexual relationship between Corvick and Gwendolen is something that promotes this latter kind of reading. During the story, we learn that the couple's engagement is unexpectedly broken off and Corvick goes to India, leaving the narrator and Gwendolen at home. After several months, Gwendolen receives a sudden cable, dramatically announcing that Corvick has at last discovered the meaning of Vereker's work: '*Eureka. Immense*' is all it says and Gwendolen immediately cables the excited narrator to tell him the news, later explaining that '*the thing itself*' will be revealed fully only after she marries Corvick on his return. James seems to link the promised fruits of literary success to sexual consummation, even telling us that Gwendolen believes that Corvick's determination to withhold the secret until after they are married is '*tantamount to saying – isn't it? – that I must marry him straight off!*' When Corvick is subsequently killed in an accident on the couple's honeymoon, the narrator's obsession for locating Vereker's secret meaning even leads him temporarily to consider marrying Gwendolen himself: '*Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives – for lovers supremely united?*'. Indeed, James hints that the narrator's solitary existence, pursuing the Figure at the expense of living a sexually fulfilled and meaningful life, exempts him from reaching the literary understanding he is so determined to find. Eventually, on a visit to the widowed Gwendolen, he finds the courage to ask her what she knows, only to find to his despair that Gwendolen refuses to tell him, responding with '*the largest, finest, coldest 'Never*'. He subsequently reads her second novel in the hope of finding some trace of what he is seeking, but disconsolately realises '*the figure was not the figure I was looking for*'.

Finally, we learn that everyone in the story whom the narrator believes to be initiated into the secret dies, the theme of death deployed by James here to signify the unachievable nature of the quest undertaken by his protagonists. Following Corvick's death, Vereker dies abroad followed by his sickly wife. Gwendolen remarries, this time to another critic, Drayton Deane, and subsequently dies herself in childbirth, leaving the narrator '*shut up in my obsession forever – my gaolers had gone off with the key*'. Assuming that Deane, as Gwendolen's widower, will be the last remaining person in possession of the knowledge he so desperately pursues, the narrator finally tracks him down to question him about the Figure. James allows Deane to deliver the devastating final blow: '*I don't know what you're talking about*' and our forlorn narrator is left to assume either that Deane is insufficiently intelligent to have been entrusted with the secret, or that he too will want to join the narrator in his unquenchable desire for the Figure. Either way, James leaves his unfortunate narrator sealed up forever within his obsessive quest for meaning.

### **Ways of reading.**

Why does James's narrator fail to 'get at' the Figure? It seems that from the outset, he is engaged in the Jamesian quest for Knowledge, for what Todorov (1973) calls, in his discussion of James's tale, '*an absolute and absent cause*' (p. 73). In order to provoke the hunt, the Figure must be always absent and unseen even while its presence underwrites everything that happens in the narrative. But in reading James's fable, we find ourselves taking up the position of his narrator confronted with the paradox of an absence which is continually present and which, as Halter (1984) argues in Lacanian vein, continually defers meaning and thus any successful resolution of the narrator's

conundrum. In the end, like the narrator too, we are neither able to tell whether there is a Figure to find, nor why James wanted to pose the dilemma in the first place. Indeed, one of the many ironies conveyed by James in his novella is that in our baffled attempts to pluck the meaning from the heart of the story, we become ensnared in the very trap James's wretched narrator is unable to resist.

It is worth quoting James's Preface to *The Figure in the Carpet* in full here:

*'I came to Hugh Vereker, in fine, by this travelled road of a generalisation; the habit of having noted for many years how strangely and helplessly, among us all, what we call criticism - its curiosity never emerging from the limp state - is apt to stand off from the intended sense of things....Vereker's drama.....is that at a given moment the limpness begins vaguely to throb and heave, to become conscious of a comparative tension. As an effect of this mild convulsion acuteness, at several points, struggles to enter the field and the question that accordingly comes up, the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn't been lost'.*

In this remarkable and sexually suggestive piece of writing, James points to a relationship between the writer who intends to convey something and the reader/critic who receives it as potentially an erotic one; yet one that is nonetheless in danger of never emerging '*from the limp state*'. Limpness here seems to refer to a lack of sensitivity or what James calls '*acuteness*', as if the reader is oblivious, failing utterly to be curious or excited about what it is the writer is attempting to convey; worse, failing even to notice that there is something to *be* conveyed, as dramatized by James's dismayed, and dismaying, narrator. But what James goes on to draw attention to is that at the moment the reader's curiosity is piqued, just as a '*comparative tension*' arises, there is a struggle, a conflict. We see this conflict played out in the encounter between the '*cheap journalese*' used by James's narrator to pin down, describe and locate the Figure and the kind of refined sensibility that is exemplified by Corvick's '*supersubtlety*'; as if the '*question that accordingly comes up*' for James is one of whether we are able at all, as readers, to notice, pay attention, be conscious of what is indirect and elusive. James seems to be drawing attention here that that which resists definition in the text, something which is in danger of disappearing entirely in our attempts to articulate, label and define it.

The very '*secret of perception*' appears to lie in the particular kind of sensibility that is needed to detect and establish the writer's meaning. In his essay '*Criticism*', James (1893) had already articulated the constellation of qualities he deemed necessary in the reader/critic whom he saw acting as companion to the writer's intentions: '*To lend himself, to project himself, to feel and feel till he understands, and to understand so well that he can say, to have perception at the pitch of passion*' (p. 264). This is a significant statement from James who is telling us that it is feeling that leads to understanding, not the reverse. Rather than constituting the opposite pole to cognition and understanding as is frequently thought to be the case, feeling and passion instead underpin it. Sexual passion, of course, is famous for rendering those involved blind to judgement and thought; yet James nonetheless makes a claim here for the primacy of feeling and desire, something he illustrates in the relationship that Corvick and Gwendolen cement over their ardent love of literature. More, the passionate coupling of the lovers that leads them to literary understanding is mirror image of the passionate relationship between reader and text that leads to what James calls in his Preface to '*The Lesson of the Master*', '*the beautiful Gate itself of enjoyment*' (p. 227). Reading, for James, thus seems to be akin to a love affair in which the reader's consciousness is, like Corvick

and Gwendolen, '*supremely united*' with the work of literature and the portrayal of life that it offers. And so James's slow-witted narrator fails to perceive Vereker's artistic intention not simply because of a lack of intelligence or literary scholarship so much as his inability to move beyond a certain kind of emotional sterility. He is unable to fully, passionately and profoundly engage with the work of literature and so the relationship is destined to remain forever unconsummated.

The passionate engagement with the text that James advocates seems to enact a process parallel to that of artistic creativity. The erotic stands as metaphor here not only for the kind of reading that James is interested in, but also for the very source of artistic inspiration that first stimulated and now imbues the text. In his Preface to '*The Spoils of Poynton*', James (1934/2011) mentions what he calls '*the virus of suggestion*', the merest hint or germ of a story stumbled on in casual conversation that in his mind comes to form the basis of a subsequent tale. Miming its erotic impact via further use of sexually allusive vocabulary, James goes on to refer to '*the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo at the touch of which the novelist's imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point: its virtue is all in its needle-like quality, the power to penetrate as finely as possible* (p. 119). As writer and critic, James wants to be – in fact, insists on being – intensely receptive to something almost imperceptible, a '*vague echo*' in the surrounding atmosphere, a signifier to which his '*supersubtle*' hearing is highly attuned, acutely sensitive. It seems to be something charged with an excess of meaning that, sharp as a needle, punctures – or '*penetrates*', James says in rather less ambiguous terms – his consciousness and gets the quest for meaning going in his imagination. It is as if the text becomes infected by the '*virus of suggestion*', something that James passes on to the reader who may, in his or her turn, become as gripped, enthralled and captivated as the hapless narrator in the Figure in the Carpet.

### **The Figure and the enigmatic signifier.**

In James's fable, the erotic is that '*sharp point*' which acts to incite, to invite interest; and in its very ambiguity, it acts as irresistible spur to the reader to try to understand and make sense of the story. Indeed, it could be argued that *The Figure in the Carpet* throws down a kind of textual gauntlet, setting the reader off – or up, perhaps – on his or her quest for elucidation. And so I want to suggest that James's story illuminates and embodies something that literature has the potential to do: to invite, solicit and seduce the reader. Our curiosity '*throbs and heaves*'; the text, as it were, goads the reader into a response.

This agitating property of a text that James dramatizes in his novella is something with which the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche was to become concerned nearly a century later. Like Winnicott, Laplanche appears at first to be an improbable literary companion to James. However, we might remember his theory of the enigmatic signifier is rooted in James's time, framed as a re-appropriation of Freud's early seduction theory, a model Freud abandoned in 1897 only a year after *The Figure in the Carpet* was published. Freud's subsequent understanding of the psychic trauma of sexuality in the aetiology of the neuroses is significantly reworked in Laplanche's (1999) myth of human origins, where he sees the provocation of the enigmatic, sexual other as constitutive of subjectivity. Our inner lives, Laplanche suggests, are set in motion as infants by the continual stream of what he calls enigmatic 'messages' conveyed by the caregiver and which constitute the scene of so-called primal seduction. This ordinary and inevitable part of development is characterised by a fundamental asymmetry: not only is the fledgling subject biologically dependent on the adult

caregiver, but there is a discrepancy in what Laplanche calls the 'communication situation' because unlike the adult, the infant has, as yet, no sexual unconscious. The messages that the adult conveys to the infant are therefore saturated with unconscious sexual significance and are, suggests Forester (1999), doubly enigmatic: *'not just because the infant has no access to a code to determine their meaning, or because they outstrip its capacities for understanding, but because, compromised by the unconscious wishes of the other, they are opaque to the adult as well'* (p. 12). In the infant's attempts to assimilate or manage these unfathomable messages transmitted by the adult there is always an excess of representation that cannot be metabolised, a surplus that exceeds the infant's capacity to bind and translate. It is this excess that Laplanche suggests is repressed and forms the basis of the infant's unconscious. The unconscious is therefore the repressed, untranslated (and untranslatable) enigmatic residue of the other, an *'internal foreign body....: the unconscious as an alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien'* (1999, p, 65).

This residue or trace of the other's unconscious within us is puzzling, says Laplanche, because the adult's unwitting transmission of a signal to the infant has become uncoupled from its referent: *'The passage to the unconscious'* he writes (1999) *'is correlative with a loss of referentiality'* (p. 90). The repressed residue of the other *'loses its status as presentation (as signifier) in order to become a thing which no longer presents (signifies) anything other than itself'* (p.90) and the interrogative function of the signifier means that whilst it addresses the subject, it doesn't represent or signify anything specific. In other words, the enigmatic message comes to mean something to the child without the adult (or the child) necessarily realising precisely what is being conveyed: *'The signifier may be designified without thereby losing its ability to signify to'* (1989, p. 45). The child is thus constitutively ill-equipped to understand what the adult's message might signify, for the code that might determine its translation is lacking. All that remains is a puzzling message that appears to be aimed at, intended for, signifying to the child. It is as if the adult inadvertently provides the child with a question to which there is no answer, a question which the child will thereafter ceaselessly attempt yet forever fail to understand, bind and come to terms with. This is precisely the condition of James's unfortunate narrator, who remains baffled and confounded by the question of Corvick and Gwendolen's sexual connection and its implied relationship to knowledge and the meaning of literature. All he is dimly and jealously aware of is an intimacy between them from which he is excluded; their involvement in *'a pastime too precious to be shared with the crowd'* is puzzlingly but inextricably linked to their *'infatuation'* with Vereker's text.

In his reworking of Freud's metapsychology, Laplanche deploys a cosmic metaphor, aligning the other with the **sixteenth-century** Copernican relocation of the sun to the centre of the solar system during the sixteenth-century, whilst Freud's psycho-sexual paradigm is metaphorically **allied** affiliated with Ptolemy's geocentric model, where the earth is deemed central to the universe. Laplanche sees the infant as ineluctably caught up in the gravitational 'pull' of the other's message, helpless to resist the adult's opaque, sexually-saturated messages rather as the narrator is helplessly in thrall to Vereker's *'primal plan'*. But following on from this Copernican openness to the enigmatic other around whom we orbit, there is always a countervailing Ptolemaic tendency to closure, to repression, to bring the enigma under control: *'the dominant tendency'* says Laplanche (1999) *'is always to relativize the discovery and to re-assimilate and reintegrate the alien, so to speak'* (p. 65). In psychoanalysis, this usually takes the form of what Laplanche calls the 'filled-in transference': the patient's well-rehearsed self-constructions, the narratives by which he or she has lived that bind the signifier to a familiar and reassuring self-identity. The work of psychoanalysis, suggests Laplanche



(1999), is to reopen the originary situation, to maintain what he calls a 'Copernican' openness to the enigma so that these '*old, insufficient, partial and erroneous*' (p. 164) translations, (the translations of translations which the subject is continually reworking), can give way to fresh ideas and different understandings. The analyst's job, he argues, is to maintain a space for the 'hollowed out transference' through which the '*dimension of alterity*' (p. 230) can be maintained and reworked.

James shows a similar concern with the consequences of this tendency to closure, this domestication of the enigmatic psychic nucleus within. In the efforts of his hapless narrator, James caricatures the futile attempt to continually reduce the mystery of Vereker's story to '*vulgar*' clichés and second hand phrases borrowed from other reviewers. James is far more interested in the possibility of a radical openness to the world that is beyond our capacity to reduce it to what is already known. It is precisely this acute awareness of alterity that he portrays in Corvick's '*supersubtlety*' whose unconscious is sensitive to the '*hints and whiffs*', the '*faint wandering notes of a hidden music*' in a way that the narrator's is not.

Laplanche sees subjectivity as the continual attempt throughout life to translate and retranslate these baffling messages deposited by our parents or caregivers. But in an interesting shift, he suggests that psychoanalysis is not the only or even the most important site of the subject's efforts to re-describe, symbolise or translate the enigmatic trace of the other within. '*If one accepts*' he writes, '*that the fundamental dimension of transference is the relation to the enigma of the other, perhaps the principal site of transference, 'ordinary' transference, before, beyond or after analysis, would be the multiple relation to the cultural, to creation or, more precisely, to the cultural message*' (1999, p.222). Laplanche is arguing here that a central characteristic of the cultural is an address to '*the nameless crowd*' (p. 224) who will receive the '*message in the bottle*' (p. 48) that is cast out by the artist to '*others scattered in the future*' (p. 224). The cultural thus constitutes an intrusive and sexually stimulating enigma that is received by the anonymous future addressee without the artist or writer explicitly addressing anyone in particular. Just as transference constitutes a re-opening of the originary situation of primal seduction, so too, suggests Laplanche (1999), the book, the work of art, the film, the symphony provokes a response in the recipient or addressee who is ineluctably pulled into the orbit of its unconscious message, something which '*repeats the originary situation of the human being*' (p. 83).

Of course, as Stack (2005) has pointed out, there can be a range of responses to the cultural enigmatic signifier. After the failure of *Guy Domville*, James knew only too well that not everyone is equally sensitive to the '*vague echo*' of the artist's intentions. Both James and Laplanche, albeit in different ways, are curious about what we might call the fate of the cultural message, the '*hints and whiffs*' from the work of art that find a passage to the public's ears and eyes. Laplanche (1999) offers a theoretical outline of what he sees as the various vicissitudes of the unconscious message where it can either be left untranslated, becoming a persecutory communication incarnated by the individual's superego, or it may be successfully repressed, continuing as a troublesome splinter lodged within in the individual's unconscious. In this latter version of repression, the text or work of art comes to be enclosed by a 'Ptolemaic' translation that domesticates its enigmatic qualities. Like James's narrator, the individual merely rehearses and rehashes prior ideas and critiques. But in a third vicissitude, Laplanche (2014) refers to '*a repression, but one that preserves the sharp goad of the enigma*' (p. 96); a form of repression that nonetheless maintains a 'Copernican' opening to the enigma that allows the individual to remain '*available to the other who comes to surprise me*' (p. 98).

It is this encounter with the *'sharp goad of the enigma'* that James is able to stage for us so evocatively in *The Figure in the Carpet*: a staging that aligns us with the protagonists in order that we too may be pulled into the orbit of that *'vague echo'*, the *'needle-like'* artistic message that James wants us continually to ponder.

### **Criticism, psychoanalytic theory and reading.**

*'There is then creative reading as well as writing'*, claims Emerson (1837, p.59.); and so the act of reading books for James and the (very different) psychoanalytic act of 'reading' people for Laplanche could be said, in the reading of these two writers that I am developing here, to share a common creative endeavour; one that requires a *'supersubtle'* sensitivity, an alertness to the *'virus of suggestion'* and a willingness to read in a way that sustains a 'Copernican' receptivity or openness to new possibilities, fresh nuances, and shades and refinements of meaning within the story.

But what might this mean for that class of literature we call psychoanalytic theory? *'In a certain manner'*, writes Laplanche (1999), *'analytic theory is in this respect a metatheory in relation to the fundamental theorisation that all human beings carry out: not primarily in order to appropriate Nature, but to bind anxiety in relation to the trauma that is the enigma'* (p. 132). If psychoanalytic theory is what Freud invented in order to manage or make sense of what is mysterious, what cannot be understood or consciously thought about, what does this mean for how it should be read? It may be appropriate – even enjoyable - to read imaginative literature inventively, but we tend to think rather differently when it comes to the psychoanalytic literature. Indeed, psychoanalytic theory is generally something we read more out of duty than pleasure, partly because psychoanalysis has always been rather protectionist about its theoretical lineage. Its history has been riven with well-known disputes over the literature and who, following Freud, had the right to convey, teach and disseminate its central tenets and doctrines. The extraordinarily divisive wrangling in the wartime Controversial Discussions within the British Psycho-Analytic Society that took place over the introduction of Melanie Klein's ideas within the Freudian community was perhaps emblematic of its tendency to adopt what Roustang aptly calls a theological reading of Freud. (Roustang's (1986) own grim literary masterpiece, *Dire Mastery*, suggests this historical obeisance to Freud, and later, in France, to Lacan, was linked to power disputes within psychoanalytic institutions that continue to find a powerful counterpart in arguments over the standing and status of psychoanalysis today).

Against this historical backdrop, then, we can begin to understand why the critical reception that greeted the presentation of Winnicott's paper to the British Psychoanalytic Society in November of 1952 was so decidedly chilly. Winnicott's paper was called – not co-incidentally perhaps – *'Anxiety Associated with Insecurity'* and it was intended as a response to a paper given earlier that year by Charles Rycroft on vertigo. In his paper, Winnicott set out to elaborate on the importance of the mother's function in giving her baby a feeling of security, and in his characteristically playful style made the following comment to his colleagues: *'I found myself saying to this society (about ten years ago) and I said it rather excitedly and with heat: 'There is no such things as a baby' (p. 99)*. Of course, in drawing attention to the mother's good-enough care of her infant, Winnicott knew that he was flying in the face of the Kleinian orthodoxy that privileges and prioritises internal unconscious phantasy. *'Anxiety'* he daringly suggested, *'can be prevented with good enough care.... the unit is not the individual, the unit is an environment-individual set-up. The centre of gravity of the being does*

*not start off in the individual. It is in the total-set-up'* (p. 99). Winnicott's paper was roundly criticised during the meeting, and afterwards, in a letter to Klein he wrote:

*I personally think that it is very important that your work should be restated by people discovering in their own way and presenting what they discover in their own language. It is only in this way that the language will be kept alive. If you make the stipulation that in future only your language shall be used for the statement of other people's discoveries then language becomes a dead language as it has already become in the Society...The worst example perhaps, was C's paper in which he simply bandied about a lot of that which has now come to be known as Kleinian stuff without giving any impression of the processes personal to the patient. One felt that if he were growing a daffodil he would think that he was making the daffodil out of a bulb instead of enabling the bulb to develop into a daffodil by good enough nurture* (p. 35).

All orthodoxies, including psychoanalytic ones, insist on imposing a single language. For Winnicott, the compulsory use of Kleinian or any other kind of theoretical language risked stifling creativity and growth; if theoretical language can't be pulled about, played with, attacked or 'destroyed', as he might have said, then it dies off; it ceases to be useful, viable, vital. In Laplanchean terms, theoretical orthodoxy incarnates the Ptolemaic re-centring of the enigma that is thereby domesticated into something known, familiar, rehearsed. Perhaps it is not surprising for a clinician so engaged in playfulness, spontaneity and authenticity that Winnicott was particularly opposed to what he saw as the analytic rigidity and docile obedience of many of his colleagues within the British Institute of Psychoanalysis and was determined to defend his right to rework '*Kleinian stuff*' in his own words and in his own way. Winnicott, of course, was notoriously reluctant to reference other thinkers and writers, and it was quite usual for him not to acknowledge what he borrowed from his rivals and precursors within the psychoanalytic cannon. His version of Freudian and Kleinian metapsychology is highly idiosyncratic, and his allusions and ideas are couched in terms that render them all but unrecognisable. He was, of course, well aware of his capacity to absorb, assimilate and transform theoretical ideas from other people. In 1945, he writes:

*'I shall not first give an historical survey and show the development of my ideas from the theories of others, because my mind doesn't work that way. What happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories and then, last of all, interest myself in looking to see where I stole what. Perhaps this is as good a method as any'* (p.145).

Winnicott, like James, seems to be alert to the '*virus of suggestion*' which, for him, emerges vividly within psychoanalytic theory. Like James, he gathers '*this and that*', refashioning it according to his own clinical experience, not worrying about where it comes from. If, as James suggests, '*[t]o criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticized thing and to make it one's own*' then we could say that Winnicott is Klein's best critic, seizing possession of her ideas in order to rework and reweave them into the fabric of his own developing theories. Like Harold Bloom's 'strong poet', he insists on the right to deliberately 'misread' his analytic rivals and precursors in a way that marks out a distinctive, new and creative place for himself. '*I have an irritating way of saying things in my own language*' he writes in a letter to Anna Freud in 1945, '*instead of learning how to use the terms of psychoanalytic metapsychology*' (p. 58). By modifying, adapting and revising the prevailing theories of the day, by framing them in his

allusive, paradoxical and playful language, Winnicott manages to keep a sense of discovery, of creativity, alive and in circulation.

Of course, you don't have to be a psychoanalyst to recognise, as I suspect Winnicott did, that there is often something peculiarly dense, inscrutable and puzzling about most psychoanalytic texts. Like the narrator in *'The Figure in the Carpet'*, we are often left to wonder whether there is *'evidently.....something to be understood'* in these frequently baffling tracts. Perhaps it is precisely this indecipherable quality that sponsors the kind of Ptolemaic recentring that Laplanche sees as an effort to domesticate the enigma of alterity. So when Winnicott remarks that *'C. bandied about a lot of that which has now come to be known as Kleinian stuff'*, he is referring to the way his colleague appears have sold his own original views, his psychoanalytic birthright as it were, for a mess of Klein; 'rehashing' his psychoanalytic ideas to fit within an already known and familiar theoretical language. Reading theory in this way all too easily acts to domesticate alterity, providing a Ptolemaic vehicle for smugly re-affirming and buttressing professional credentials, affiliations and identities. Winnicott, perhaps like James, wants us to engage with something far less complacent and much more uncertain; his insistence on ambiguity, allusion and playfulness – *'there's no such thing as a baby'* for example is a phrase artfully posed more as riddle than fact - ensures the reader is not freighted with some kind of presumed 'knowledge' or psychoanalytic orthodoxy but is rather left free to contemplate fresh possibilities for thinking and experiencing. In pointing towards a way of reading that sustains a 'Copernican' opening – 'paradox' being Winnicott's favourite word for this - we are endlessly provoked into further translations, further possibilities, further meaning making.

I am now at the point of suggesting that in Winnicott's reading and writing of psychoanalysis we can begin to discern the enigmatic trace of James, the writer he read so much of as a young man. Both writers reveal to us the importance of the reader's hospitality to that which is strange or other within the text, and both convey the significance of this welcome in a form and language that allows us as readers to live an experience in the act of reading; a miming that enacts and makes luminous the call to 'Copernican' receptivity under discussion. In *'The Figure in the Carpet'*, we ourselves participate in the narrator's increasingly baffled search for meaning, feeling his bewilderment and frustration as our own even as we simultaneously recognise the hunt to be futile. This paradoxical awareness does not of course prevent us from being caught in the very bind James's narrator incarnates; it is in fact constitutive of it, for as we read, the words of the text seem to lodge within us and we are swept up in the chase for which James has himself sounded the horn. Perhaps this is the psychic consequence of the passionate sort of reading that James advocates, a reading in which the words, thoughts and ideas of the writer act as a kind of erotic charge within us, penetrating and mating with the reader's own thoughts, feelings and imagination: *'lovers'*, like Corvick and Gwendolen, *'supremely united'*. Put another way, whilst the text may convey the writer's thoughts, we do not experience them as such; rather, we experience them *as our own*. Although I may be reading the text, it is almost as if I cede to something or someone else; I surrender, as it were, to another self, another 'I'; one to whom I am now, in the very act of reading, highly susceptible. In this sense, we as readers are not simply gripped or enthralled by a book: we are to a large extent taken over, dispossessed of ourselves. It is as if the book appropriates, even commandeers our consciousness such that the writer's thoughts, actions and feelings - his worldview - temporarily usurps our own. When we read in this way, we are truly, in Laplanche's terms, 'decentred': we surrender once again to an originary situation in which the enigmatic, psychic forcefield of the other is primary.

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This extraordinary achievement of literature – the implantation of an unseen, even long-dead other into the psyche, the self – is obviously and quintessentially a preoccupation for the kind of psychoanalysis that takes the other as primary locus of subjectivity. It is not surprising then that Winnicott (1958) went on to develop his ideas about anxiety into a subsequent paper *'The Capacity to be Alone'*. Alone for Winnicott, means alone in the presence of a mother who doesn't make any demands on the child, who doesn't impinge or interrupt the child's growing autonomy. This permits a 'potential space' in which the child is able to begin to sort out what is 'me' and what is 'not me' and to become interested in, absorbed by and involved with a world beyond his or her omnipotence. Whilst for Winnicott the archetypal absorption of the child is in play, I would like to suggest that it is only a short time later that the absorption of the child at play evolves into the rapt absorption of the child *reading*. In order to read, and to read passionately, as James urges us to do, perhaps we first need the experience of *being alone with someone*; being alone in the presence of mother becomes the prototype, the template, for reading alone in the presence of the text or author. It is in this potential space of reading that we encounter - and re-encounter again and again - the experience of being alone, and yet not alone; where we are once again in the company of an absence; an absence which, like The Figure, is continually present. And it is the quality of our relationship to that presence-in-absence, our receptivity to what is enigmatically both 'there' but 'not there', what is self and what is other, that Winnicott deems crucial not only to cultural experience, but to creative living more generally.

## Conclusion

The figure of the literary critic, or critic as ideal reader, is one that haunts James's early work; like Winnicott's child playing alone in the presence of mother, James too sees an imagined companion as essential to the creative process: *'...one sees the critic as the real helper of the artist'* he writes, *'a torch-bearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother. The more the tune is noted and the direction observed the more we shall enjoy the convenience of a critical literature'* (1893, p.264). The artist, the creator, suggests James, needs his work, his message or *'donnee'* to be seen, to be noticed; in fact, we might say that it is in the imagined eyes and sensitivity of the ideal reader that the entire inspiration for the artistic work resides. The fantasy of the critic/audience becomes itself a kind of enigmatic provocation to the writer, just as the book, the play, the work of art becomes a provocation to the public and particularly to the critic. One of the implications of *'The Figure in the Carpet'* seems to be the special responsibilities borne by the critic who is professionally charged not only with receiving the message of the artist, but also conveying his or her understanding or interpretation of it to the public. How to do this in a way that maintains the *'sharp goad'* of the artistic message, rather than diluting it by resorting to what Laplanche describes as *'old, insufficient, partial and erroneous'* interpretations is the task that James sees as central to the critic's vocation.

If this potential space of reading can, to borrow Winnicott's (1971) words, *'be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living'* (p. 121), then it is scarcely surprising that for James the critic holds a sacred vocation as the writer's addressee who is charged with responsibility for provoking the creativity constitutive of artistic life. *'His life, at this rate'*, admits James (1893) *'is heroic, for it is immensely vicarious. He has to understand for others, to answer for them; he is always under arms...he deals with life at second-hand as well as at first; that is, he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own'* (p. 265). This could just as well be a description of the psychoanalyst who might equally be thought of as *'under arms'*, and who

*'deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own'*. For Laplanche, the provocation of the artistic message to which the critic responds is paralleled by the provocation of the psychoanalyst to whom the patient responds. Both culture and psychoanalysis constitute sites of alterity in which a 'Copernican' opening to, rather than a 'Ptolemaic' reversal of the enigmatic qualities of the unconscious message may be invited, promoted and sustained. Indeed, the end of a psychoanalysis, Laplanche (2014) argues, is indexed by the possibility of *'the transference of the relation to the enigma as such'* (p. 102) where a shift to other cultural sites of inspiration and alterity may start to occur. Rather than this implying the usual kind of object loss and mourning, Laplanche (2014) sees it as the occasion of a continued, future possibility of *'being surprised, seized, traversed by the endless questioning of whoever comes to encounter us'* (p.102).

The capacity to be surprised by new experiences, to chance upon fresh sources of inspiration, to continually refine, revise and find new meanings within what we read and what we experience is central to all the ideas about reading and creativity I have attempted to bring together in this paper. Indeed, the potentially limitless sources of inspiration and creativity are what make us artists of our own lives; magpies, as it were, thieving otherness from wherever we can find it in order to creatively establish and re-establish a self within. If the possibility of limitless meaning-making is what lends psychoanalysis its always unfinished dimension, it is also what permeates James's decidedly enigmatic ending to his Preface to *'The Figure in the Carpet'*:

*'...the question that accordingly comes up, the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn't been lost. That is the situation, and The Figure in the Carpet exhibits a small group of well-meaning persons engaged in a test. The reader is, on the evidence, left to conclude'*.

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