

The ... in the Jungle: The Sounds—and the Sounding—of Silence in Late James

MICHAEL ANESKO
Pennsylvania State University

I had occasion lately to teach (or try to teach) “The Beast in the Jungle” to a class of undergraduates—almost all of them first-semester freshmen, few of whom (I’m sure) will be destined to become English majors. To get things going, I asked them first simply to tell me what they thought the story was about. Perhaps not surprisingly, the class fell silent when confronted by that basic question, and I then prompted them to consider whether their collective (non)responsive blank might not, in fact, be an appropriate answer. The absence of sound might be a clue. How does one write a story about nothing? I then asked them to consider a series of brief quotations from the story, drawn sequentially from the text:

Oh, he understood what she meant. (*CS* 513)¹

He laughed as he saw what she meant. (*CS* 517)

[Again, Marcher:] “Why what you mean—what you’ve always meant.”

¹ In the New York Edition text, Henry James underscores the irony by substituting an exclamation point for the terminal period.

She again shook her head. "What I mean isn't what I've always meant. It's different." (CS 525-26)

He had had her word for it as he left her—what else, on earth, could she have meant? (CS 529)

If he could but know what she meant! (CS 532)

The point of this schematic summary of narration and dialogue was to help the class better appreciate the elusive nature of *meaning*—and to recognize the story's (deliberate) internal descent from confident interpretation toward a veritable abyss of ambiguity and uncertainty. Accordingly, this last exasperated thought of Marcher's could be transliterated back into the group's silent response to my first question: If we (as readers) could but know what James meant!

Of course, there are lots of critics who think they know what James meant—even if he didn't, or couldn't bring himself to uncloset the latent implications of his tale.² At any rate, it's useful to remember (and to remind one's students) that the story doesn't just end with a collapse into uncertainty—it also begins that way, too, although the overtones at the start of things are decidedly different.

Even though "The Beast in the Jungle" isn't *Gigi*—far from it—the comic exchange of miscommunication and misremembrance between Marcher and May Bartram at the beginning of the story anticipates the lyrical strains of "Yes, I Remember It Well" and underscores just how important gaps, omissions, and silences will be in the pages ahead. Their first meeting wasn't in Rome (it was in Naples); no, it hadn't been seven years before (it had been more nearly ten); and May Bartram's traveling companions were not her uncle and aunt but rather her mother and brother. In these details—and almost everything else—Marcher gets everything wrong. "Oh, he understood what she meant!"—except, of course, he doesn't.³

In fact, from the very first line of the story, James provokes the reader by leaving things out:

² Especially since Sedgwick published her transformative re-reading of the story as a closeted confession of homosexual panic.

³ As Heyns observes, the story gets its start through the demonstration of an "inequality of memory" (112). In a memorable passage from the preface written later for the volume of the New York Edition in which this story was reprinted, James classifies Marcher among the "poor sensitive gentlemen" for which he had such an "attested predilection" (*FW* 1250). One might venture to say, however, that John Marcher is one of the most *insensitive* characters James ever created.

What determined the speech that startled him in the course of their encounter scarcely matters, being probably but some words spoken by himself quite without intention—spoken as they lingered and slowly moved together after their renewal of acquaintance. (CS 496)

It is hardly accidental that “The Beast in the Jungle” begins with an ellipsis, a reference to discourse to which the reader (as yet) has no access—another tip-off, in its way, that the dramatic interest of the story will be intensified by silence, by words unspoken or unrecorded, and gestures unmade.⁴

We should also note that James frequently employs another version of this technique in the representation of direct discourse, especially at moments when May Bartram is responding to Marcher’s badgering questions or blandly patronizing observations. Whereas his speech typically appears on the page as a continuous utterance, Bartram’s more often is paused by nominative interjections, which have not only grammatical but also psychological implications. Quantitatively speaking, the record of Marcher’s speech usually requires only two quotation marks: opening and closing. Bartram’s requires four. A telling example comes near the beginning of section 3 of the story, when Marcher (perhaps prodded by something like a guilty conscience) acknowledges the social inequality of their odd relationship: her more or less constant acquaintance having “saved” him by making him “indistinguishable from other men.” “What is it that saves *you*?” he now asks—a question further elaborated in free indirect discourse:

saved her, he meant, from that appearance of variation from the usual human type. If he had practically escaped remark, as she pretended, by doing, in the most important particular what most men do—find the answer to life in patching up an alliance of a sort with a woman no better than himself—how had she escaped it, and how could the alliance, such as it was, since they must suppose it had been more or less noticed, have failed to make her rather positively talked about? “I never said,” May Bartram replied, “that it hadn’t made me talked about.” “Ah well then, you’re not ‘saved.’”

⁴ As Phelan notes, “Beginning this way allows James not only to employ the dramatic method that he favors but also to guide our interest, our suspense, in that drama in a rather pointed way” (109). Less charitably, Geismar deplors “the typical Jamesian sexless diffusion of passion through conversation,” which only confirms the author’s “true failure as a human being” (35, 40).

“It has not been a question for me. If you’ve had your woman, I’ve had,” she said, “my man.” (*CS* 516)

In both instances here, the deferred specification of meaning silently suggests hesitation, as if she is weighing alternatives or possibly repressing one thought in place of another.⁵

As such, these moments of implied silence foreshadow the climactic turn of the story (in section 4), when the two of them are standing before the cold fireplace in her London flat and Marcher anticipates that, because she is dying, May Bartram at last will reveal the mystery of his fate:

It had become suddenly, from her movement and attitude, beautiful and vivid to him that she had something more to give him; her wasted face delicately shone with it, and it glittered, almost as with the white lustre of silver, in her expression. She was right, incontestably, for what he saw in her face was the truth, and strangely, without consequence, while their talk of it as dreadful was still in the air, she appeared to present it as inordinately soft. This, prompting bewilderment, made him but gape the more gratefully for her revelation, so that they continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind, but all expectant. The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to sound. (*CS* 526-27)

Presumably, Marcher expresses his frustration in cruel remonstrance or insult (“he was afterwards to say to himself that he must have spoken with odious impatience” [*CS* 527]): so that one form of repressed speech perversely mirrors the other. And the effect, as we all know, is fatal. May Bartram carries her silence to the grave, where the two names on her tombstone become “like a pair of eyes that didn’t know him” (*CS* 535)—a grim echo, in fact, of the scene just cited, when, expecting some kind of answer or explanation from May (but not getting it), Marcher receives instead a silent gesture: “the mere closing of her eyes” (*CS* 527).

For better or worse—and critics disagree violently on this point—the conclusion of “The Beast in the Jungle” is anything but silent.⁶ Instead, in

⁵ For a more general examination of this technique, see Wexler.

⁶ If anything, the critical debate concerning the psychological implications of May Bartram’s deliberate reticence has become rather shrill. Instead of reading May’s silence as a conventional symptom of feminine propriety, Petty sees her “concealment of her feelings”

the closing paragraphs of the story, James seems to merge his narrative voice with Marcher's anguished consciousness, making explicit—and apparently privileging—one kind of meaning at the possible expense of others. (“The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived” [CS 540].) I asked my students if the story wouldn't, in fact, be better if James had omitted section 6 altogether—if, so to speak, he had kept *his* mouth shut. Many of them were taken aback by the suggestion—how could an author like James be *wrong*? Still, it is fascinating to know that the Master himself had reservations about the story's conclusion, reservations that were shared by at least one contemporaneous reader (Morton Fullerton), who complained about what James himself called “the superfluous passage toward the climax” of “The Beast in the Jungle.” “It is over-insistent,” James confessed, “& as of the school-slate and the columns of figures, & I felt that even as I did it. And yet I did it consciously,” he explained, “anxiously, for the help of the unutterable reader at large who would have been incapable, down to his boots,” of understanding the significance of the tale. “I find myself, again & again, counting on my fingers for him, the thankless idiot!” (WMF).

In this same letter James went on to say that, in the New York Edition (which already—in 1903—he was planning) he would suppress the offending paragraphs. But he must have concluded, just five years later, that most readers still were thankless idiots, because he left the “superfluous passage” unchanged.⁷ If nothing else, *that* has given all of us something to talk about.

as “a manifestation of her ambivalence about permanent romantic attachment” (249-50). Buelens, on the other hand, finds something almost sinister in her purported scheme of entrapment: if May's “initial investment” in Marcher's story appears “masochistically inflected (involving the surrender of her own ego to the demands of his masterplot),” it subsequently becomes “sadistic.” “She exerts mastery; she inspires Marcher with fear; she becomes the focus of what has now (but only now) become a life filled with terror” (24).

⁷ It might be worth noting, however, that, in revising the story for later publication, James did alter some of its wording—significantly deleting forms of the verb *to say*, for example, as well as *to sound*. E.g.: “Marcher said to himself” / “Marcher could only feel”; “‘Oh!’ he confusedly sounded, as she herself of late so often had done. / “‘Oh!’ he confusedly breathed, as she herself of late so often had done.” These changes work to reify the theme—and role—of silence in the tale. I am grateful to Miranda El-Rayess for sharing the table of textual variants that the late Neil Reeve had compiled for their forthcoming volume of *The Complete Fiction of Henry James*, to be published by Cambridge University Press.

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

CS—*Henry James: Complete Stories 1898–1910*. Edited by Denis Donoghue, Library of America, 1996.

FW—*French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*. Edited by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, vol. 2 of *Literary Criticism*, Library of America, 1984.

WMF—Letter to William Morton Fullerton, 14 June 1903. CO140: General Mss. (Misc.), Box JA-JE, Henry James Folder, Subfolder 2. Firestone Library, Princeton U.

OTHER WORKS CITED

Buelens, Gert. "In Possession of a Secret: Rhythms of Mastery and Surrender in 'The Beast in the Jungle.'" *Henry James Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, Winter 1998, pp. 17-35.

Geismar, Maxwell. "Henry James: 'The Beast in the Jungle.'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, no. 1, June 1963, pp. 35-42.

Heyns, Michiel W. "The Double Narrative of 'The Beast in the Jungle': Ethical Plot, Ironic Plot, and the Play of Power." *Enacting History in Henry James*, edited by Gert Buelens, Cambridge UP, 1997, pp. 109-25.

Petty, Leslie. "'If you've had your woman, I've had... my man': May Bartram's Ambivalence in 'The Beast in the Jungle.'" *Transforming Henry James*, edited by Anna De Biasio et al., Cambridge Scholars, 2013, pp. 242-55.

Phelan, James. "Character in Fictional Narrative: The Case of John Marcher." *Henry James Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, Spring 1988, pp. 105-13.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic." *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, edited by Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Johns Hopkins UP, 1986, pp. 147-86. Rpt. in Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, U of California P, 1990, pp. 182-212.

Wexler, Joyce. "Speaking Out: Dialogue and the Literary Unconscious." *Style*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1997, pp. 118-33.