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## *Henry James and Immortality: "The Beast in the Jungle" and "Is There a Life After Death?"*

by ARTHUR A. BROWN

IN AN ARTICLE THAT APPEARED in *Harper's Bazar* in 1910, Henry James asked, "Is There a Life After Death?" and concluded that there was, or that he liked and had every reason to think so. His artistic consciousness had opened the door to a life of far greater possibilities than those any mortal life could hold, and his own death would usher him into it. But James's fiction does not answer the question the same way. "The Beast in the Jungle," for example, contradicts James's thesis in "Is There a Life After Death?" The task of literature is to affirm mortality, not to deny it—or even as it denies it.

"The Beast in the Jungle" can be placed roughly in the middle of what appears to be a change in James's thinking from seeing death as the final and determining fact of life to seeing it as the end of one term of being and the beginning of another. In his headnote to "The Beast in the Jungle" that appears in *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, Leon Edel traces the story's origins. He cites James's notebook entries of January 9, 1894, and February 5, 1895, written nine and eight years before the story. In the first of these two notebook entries, James writes, "The idea of *death* both checked and caught me; for if on the one side it means the termination of consciousness, it means on the other the beginning of the drama in any case in which the consciousness survives." Here he goes on to explore the ways the consciousness can be "said to" survive so that the story of death can be told. It survives a death that is a death in life—a metaphorical death, such as artistic or moral failure, or, as he sees a year later, "a love that is formed too late" (143-44, 183). In the notebook entries, James perceives actual death as "the termination of consciousness." Metaphorical death, on the other hand, generates stories—more than one story, as Edel and Matthiessen and Murdock have pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Thus the idea of death-in-life is turned to plot. The death of James's characters is the life of his stories and of his own artistic consciousness. In turn, the life of his artistic consciousness comes round to convincing James of a life after death—not merely metaphorical but actual death.

1. See Edel's headnote to "The Beast in the Jungle" and Matthiessen and Murdock's notes in *The Notebooks* 143, 145, 149, 184. Stories in addition to "The Beast in the Jungle" that dramatize the theme of life-in-death and death-in-life include "The Death of the Lion," "The Private Life," "The Friends of the Friends," "Maud Evelyn," and "The Altar of the Dead."

In the 1910 article, James writes that, as “more or less of” an artist,

I deal with being, I invoke and evoke, I figure and represent, I seize and fix, as many phases and aspects and conceptions of it as my infirm hand allows me strength for; and in so doing I find myself—I can’t express it otherwise—in communication with *sources*; sources to which I owe the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of. (224)

James seems to be saying that in the act of figuring and representing being—in the act of writing realistic fiction (in which “the air of reality” is “the supreme virtue”)<sup>2</sup>—his resources for writing, for apprehending being or reality, become unlimited. In the context of the essay, however, the distinction blurs between James’s sense of his own unlimited ability to perceive realistic “combinations” and his conviction that these perceptions give him an insight into an unlimited reality. According to the thesis of “Is There a Life After Death?” if John Marcher had been able to write about his tragedy, he would have been not “too late” but just in time. The tragedy would disappear, and so would the story. In other words, James, who *had* been able to write about Marcher’s tragedy, had taken from it—or from the ability to write it—the conviction that no such tragedy could exist. To perceive the tragedy, to “figure and represent” being, leads to a way out of it.

James writes in the article that he is interested only in a “personal” immortality, and he realizes that to have one the signs by which he recognizes himself must remain with him after death:

I practically know what I am talking about when I say, “I,” hypothetically, for my full experience of another term of being, just as I know it when I say “I” for my experience of this one; but I shouldn’t in the least do so were I not *able* to say “I”—had I to reckon, that is, with a failure of the signs by which I know myself. (212)

To perceive at all, to be conscious, is to perceive and be conscious of the self. Yet this self can be known only, apparently, by signs—that is, by things external to it. The ability to say “I” and to know oneself by the perception of signs is heightened in the artist’s ability to imagine and construct worlds of his own.

James’s sense of himself is inseparable from his sense of himself as an artist, and it is his sense of himself as an artist that affirms his sense of personal immortality:

Living, or feeling one’s exquisite curiosity about the universe fed and fed, rewarded and rewarded—though I of course don’t say definitely answered—becomes thus the highest good I can conceive of, a million times better than not living (however *that* comfort may at bad moments have solicited us); all of which illustrates what I mean by the consecrated “interest” of consciousness. It so peoples and animates and extends and transforms itself; it so gives me the chance to take, on behalf of my personality, these inordinate intellectual and irresponsible liberties with the idea of things. And, once more—speaking for myself only and keeping to the facts of my experience—it is above all as an artist that I appreciate this beautiful and enjoyable independence of thought and more especially this assault of the boundlessly multiplied personal rela-

2. See James, “The Art of Fiction” 172-73.

tion (my own), which carries me beyond even any "profoundest" observation of this world whatever, and any mortal adventure, and refers me to realizations I am condemned as yet but to dream of. (222-23)

For James, living is an opportunity to develop his artistic relationship with the world. What he dreams of today as an artist is proof of the extended relationship with the world that he will have in reality after death.

James's insistence on a "personal immortality"—on the ability to say "I" in a world where death would no longer be a possibility—seems in keeping with his lifelong attempt to reconcile his personal life with his life of letters. To have a life of letters is, in a sense, to have a life after death; to have a life after death is, in a sense, to justify a life of letters. But only in a sense. In actuality, a life in letters, like a life after death, would be a horror; it would be, as Maurice Blanchot says of literature, "*my consciousness without me . . . existence without being, existence which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end—death as the impossibility of dying*" (47). To have a life in letters and a life after death would be to lose that which makes us human.

John Marcher is not an artist, but his own ability to say "I" and to know himself by the perception of signs is heightened by the sense he has had "from [his] earliest time, as the deepest thing within [him] . . . of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to [him]" (71). He lives in relation to this thing that will happen, which he or the narrator or both name the "beast in the jungle" (79), as if his life were a story and he himself the main character. The parallel between Marcher's life and our act of reading is conspicuous: like Marcher, we watch for the thing that will happen—we figure his life by the image of the beast; like us, Marcher reads "the open page of his story" (125). At the same time, the difference between Marcher's life and our act of reading, since it is an act that takes place in the world where death is a possibility, is so apparent as to remain *inconspicuous*. Yet we ought to ask—and the story makes us ask—what it means to believe what we are told by an omniscient narrator, or writer, and to take our place as a privileged yet disembodied listener, or reader. Our own ability to find *and lose* ourselves in language duplicates the artist's "immortality"—his ability to say "I" after death—and actualizes Marcher's death in life—his inability to live except by figuring and marking his life.

John Marcher knows himself by his sense that something prodigious will happen to him and by the knowledge, finally, of what this something is—the present that has passed him by and continues to pass him by in his unending figuration of it. He sees that his own self-consciousness is the thing that he had been waiting for and seeing all along, the thing that had made him blind to everything else. He had been unable to love May Bartram "for herself" (125); he had used her the way a writer uses a reader, or vice versa—to corroborate his way of seeing the world. What John Marcher wants is mortality; what has done him no good at all is the artistic consciousness that has made

him read his life as we read his story, which is to say, endlessly.

In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James suggests that the novelist's task is to *place* "the breath of life," the true subject of the work, in novelistic form without limiting or interfering with his own awareness of its truth (43). He writes that "the worth of a given subject" is determined by its being the genuine and sincere "result of some direct impression or perception of life." The "moral" sense of a work of art depends "on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it." He adds that "the last touch to the worth of the work" is given by "the enveloping air of the artist's humanity" (45). One would think that the artist's humanity is defined less by his "communication with *sources*" than by his "observation and experience, in their ordinary sense"—and that the artist's "direct impression or perception of life" and the life that is "felt" in the production of his work are similarly dependent on his connection, for better or worse, to life in *this* world.

To "deal with being," or to "seize and fix" being, is to put being on one's own terms, to put its fundamental value in question in a way that James seems well aware of as a writer of fiction. The value of being is *the* moral question in James's fiction. Characters in James's fiction must decide whether other characters are worth believing in, even as they construct fictions around them or become part of others' fictions. Their belief is continuously measured against a worth that runs parallel or counter to that which they perceive or construct; otherwise, there would be no story to tell.

May Bartram's belief in "*the* thing" that will happen to John Marcher (73), in "the real truth" about him (80), constitutes her love for him. "I understand you. I believe you," May tells Marcher at Weatherend. "You mean you feel how my obsession—poor old thing!—may correspond to some possible reality?" he asks. "To some possible reality," she confirms (74). Reality is exactly what she does confirm—for Marcher and for the reader. What "reality" means is the possibility of death. May is in the story precisely to die. Marcher must feel the loss not merely of the sense of himself that she had given him but of her very being: "*she* was what he had missed" (125). The extent to which he had "thought of her" in "the light of her use" is the extent to which we do (126), and to this extent will we be mistaken as to what she is worth.

Writing in *Harper's Bazar* of his "infirm hand" (in the year following the publication of the twenty-four volume New York Edition of his work), James seems a little too pleased with its powers and a little too content to have seized and fixed things with it. He seems to belittle what he might see as the one thing *not* subject to experience or belief—"the termination of consciousness," or death itself. What James is able to express in "The Beast in the Jungle" is not only Marcher's or the reader's mistake but the mistake of literature. Literature, a formation of the artistic consciousness, looks not for immortality but for death, without which there would be nothing to write about and no way to write—no being to displace and no way of displacing

it.<sup>3</sup> But the more elaborate its construction of signs, the more it disguises its own effort, until it sees nothing more than itself, or at best, its own mistake.

As Edel writes of "The Beast in the Jungle," "the surface of the story suggests the long passage of wasteful futile frustrating years" (670). It does so, however, not merely in its way of presenting events—summarizing and explicating more than dramatizing—but in the very act of presenting them. To write or read is to have something prodigious happen to you—it is to become immortal, which is to say, it is to live in a death that does not die. For a time, actual death loses its meaning; it becomes merely the principle of substitution and displacement that makes language possible, and life turns into signification. The person who can die, like everything else—like being itself—is no longer there.

In his essay, "The Dramatics of the Unspoken and Unspeakable in James's 'The Beast in the Jungle,'" Herbert Perluck positions himself against "the numerous commentaries" on the story that, in Perluck's view, "are in general agreement over its essential meaning" (252). According to this "essential meaning," Marcher is, as he says himself, "an ass" (68), though at the time he calls himself one he is not half such an ass as he turns out to be. Speaking for Marcher, who experiences the horror of self-knowledge, the narrator spells out the moral of the story at the end of it. Having kept himself "for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen" (71), Marcher becomes "the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" (125). It is to the fifty or so pages in between that Perluck wants to call our attention.

For Perluck, to read the story as an indictment of Marcher is to distance ourselves from the act of reading the story; Marcher's detachment from life parallels the detachment we all feel in "the thick, bewildering opacity of language and experience" (252). According to Perluck: "nothing ever really 'happens' to anyone" (251). The dramatic meaning of the story lies in the "misreading" of it; any "essential" or allegorical meaning that we find in the text points to our taking too easy a way out of it.

Perluck sympathizes with Marcher, who "has confounded his sense of separateness, of difference, with egotism, reproving the inescapable 'detachment' in all selfhood as lovelessness" (251). According to Perluck, the real egoist is he who believes he *can* selflessly love. May Bartram, who truly loves Marcher, knows that detachment is part of love, that claims made by marriage of inseparability are inevitably "unredeemable." For Perluck, the

3. See Blanchot, who writes, "Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet: when I say, 'This woman,' real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is. Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak: death speaks in me" (42-43). Also see Lacan, who writes that "the signifier . . . materializes the agency of death" (38).

story's tragic irony lies not in Marcher's having felt nothing but in his *thinking* that he had. "[T]o whom," Perluck asks, "under similar circumstances" (by which presumably he means having survived a loved one), "has it not occurred that he alone truly sinned, that only he felt nothing, lived nothing, hadn't really loved?" (250). He points out that the pity Marcher himself feels for a grieving stranger in the cemetery works against the judgment that the stranger's appearance seems to make: that Marcher could not feel for anyone—"He had seen *outside* of his life, not learned it within, the way a woman was mourned when she had been loved for herself . . ." (124-25).

Perluck is right to call our attention to the act of reading the story; though we may wish to see *outside* of it, the story forces us to *learn it within*. He is brave in identifying himself and the rest of us with Marcher. But he is wrong—and his own reading becomes too easy a way out of things—when he says that "nothing ever really 'happens' to anyone." However much our consciousness may distance us from what happens, however "thick" and "bewildering" our language and experience may be, things happen—different things to different people. The play between what happens and what we perceive, between the reality of mortal life and the fictional constructions we make of it, is what brings stories to life and life to stories. In "The Beast in the Jungle," the Beast springs "in Time" (97); "what was to happen *had* so absolutely and finally happened" (117)—in the events that make up Marcher's life, not all of which are determined by his attendance on the Beast.

When their acquaintance is renewed at Weatherend to begin the story, Marcher is attracted to May by his sense of her having suffered. While he believes their former meeting could have had "no importance," his "actual impression of her" seems to have a great deal, yet he finds the explanation for this discrepancy in his having "penetrated to a kind of truth" about her: "She *was* there on harder terms than any one; she was there as a consequence of things suffered, one way and another, in the interval of years . . ." (63). Against this *truth*, the Weatherend house, with all its "fine things," in which May serves as a kind of guide, flattens into a transparent figure for the house of fiction—for Marcher's fiction in particular. *She* is the real thing, and fiction cannot do without it.

Thanks to the death of May's great-aunt, May is able to set up a home in London; in turn, she and Marcher can meet frequently. James dramatizes three of their meetings. While the discussions invariably center on the thing that is to happen, the occasions mark May's birthday—and Marcher's own definite aging—May's illness, and May's dying. Take away these mortal events and we have no story. Against Marcher's sense, finally, that "he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" (125), we have May's dying word for it that "[w]hatever the reality, it *is* a reality" (105), and that what "*was* to" happen *had* (107). And it is May we believe, for she speaks with the authority of death. Until her death, May dedicates herself to watching with Marcher, to proving the truth about

him—to proving that there *is* a truth. The truth, finally, is that, in endlessly figuring his life under the image of the beast, Marcher affirms mortal being even as he denies it. He marks its very presence. And he does so most effectively by marking our own presence, our own mortal being, as we figure his life with him. We are May and Marcher both.

In "Is There a Life After Death?" James acknowledges that real things happen, though he does so reluctantly:

Those to whom such dreadful things have happened that they haven't even the refuge of the negative state of mind, but have been driven into the exasperated positive, so that they but long to lay down the burden of being and never again take it up—these unfortunates have an equal chance of expressing their attitude and of making it as eloquent and as representative as they will. (226-27)

How "equal" the chance of those to whom "dreadful things have happened" actually is we might assess, minimally, by James's tone. James suspects that "these unfortunates" will not belong "to the class of those the really main condition of whose life is to work and work their inner spirit to a productive or illustrative end" (227)—in other words, to the artist's class, the class to which he belongs and to which he must presume his audience wishes to belong.

In his headnote to the story, Edel writes that in all the "fantasies" that led to "The Beast in the Jungle," "there is the recurrent, the deeply felt, note of the *unlived life*. James the celibate, who had renounced the world on the steps of 'queer little old Dane Hall' for letters, had never completely resolved his conflict" (668). In "Is There a Life After Death?" the conflict seems resolved, to the extent that the article helps us see the fiction more clearly. "I don't mean to say," James continues,

that no sincere artist has ever been overwhelmed by life and found his connections with the infinite cut, so that his history may *seem* to represent for him so much evidence that this so easily awful world is the last word to us, and a horrible one at that: cases confounding me could quite too promptly be adduced. The point is, none the less, that in proportion as we (of the class I speak of) enjoy the greater number of our most characteristic inward reactions, in proportion as we do curiously and lovingly, yearningly and irrepressibly, interrogate and liberate, try and test and explore, our general productive and, as we like conveniently to say, creative awareness of things . . . in that proportion does our function strike us as establishing sublime relations. . . . [I]t is in a word the artistic consciousness and privilege in itself that thus shines as from immersion in the fountain of being. Into that fountain, to depths immeasurable, our spirit dips—to the effect of feeling itself, *qua* imagination and aspiration, all scented with universal sources. (227-28)

James's spirit seems to be so proportionately free of his body at this "well-nigh final pass" that it is in danger of evaporating.<sup>4</sup> To separate the artistic consciousness or privilege so completely from the artist himself and his mortal circumstances would seem to remove that consciousness from all things dramatic and give it nothing to live by. Whether James's characters take part

4. In the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant writes that "in all free arts, there is yet requisite something compulsory . . . without which the spirit, which must be free in art and which alone inspires the work, would have no body and would evaporate altogether . . ." (147).



in a life with others or are excluded from it in a private life, they are not so finished with being that they can celebrate “immersion in the fountain of [it]” without a sense of loss.

“Is There a Life After Death?” might well be taken as a eulogy for James’s brother William, who was ill and died the year it was written. In *Human Immortality*, written in 1898, William James acknowledges that the “‘transmission-theory’ of cerebral action”—which interested him more than the idea of life after death—leaves open “the doorway to immortality” (v, 3). According to this theory, the brain’s function is not to *produce* consciousness but to *transmit* it, to define and limit a larger and pre-existing consciousness. The extent to which this larger consciousness is felt or operational in an individual varies according to a “threshold” level: “When [this level] falls, as in states of great lucidity, we grow conscious of things of which we should be unconscious at other times; when it rises, as in drowsiness, consciousness sinks in amount” (24). Henry James’s “artistic consciousness” corresponds to his brother’s “[state] of great lucidity.”

According to Henry James, the “exclusively present world” offers the personality a chance to experiment in preparation for its greater freedom. James compares this “chance” to “the sustaining frame on little wheels that often encases growing infants, so that, dangling and shaking about in it, they may feel their assurance of walking increase . . .” (229-30). Matter may aid the spirit, or obstruct it, but “has no more concern in producing [it] than the baby-frame has in producing the intelligence of the baby” (231). The danger to fiction—and to life—posed by this entertaining metaphor is that “the baby” steals the show; the artistic consciousness or spirit that might enlarge our experience walks out from under it, into a world where experience—actual experience, mortal experience—no longer matters. And if we take actuality and mortality out of experience, what have we left?

In the real world, babies remind us of our humanness, our mortality. Our love for them is inseparable from our awareness of the possibility of death. And so James’s metaphor is not so dangerous to life and fiction as it seems, because it is upside down. The frame ought to represent not actual experience but the artistic consciousness; and the baby, actual experience. James had the metaphor right in “The Beast in the Jungle,” when Marcher, believing in May’s assurance that the thing *had* happened, sees himself, now that she is dead, living only to guess what it was: “The lost stuff of consciousness became thus for him as a strayed or stolen child to an unappeasable father; he hunted it up and down very much as if he were knocking at doors and enquiring of the police” (117-18). Actual experience is what walks away from the artistic consciousness. Not that experience is not subject to consciousness; but it is subject, above all, to death.

In the years after 1910, James became more concerned with real suffering in the real world than with anything else. In Edel’s “Chronological Table” that appears at the end of *The Ghostly Tales*, we read for the year 1914: “Deeply shaken by outbreak of war, nevertheless begins war work, visiting

hospitals, writing for war charities, aids Belgian refugees" (765). Without real death in the real world there would be no literature and no difference between literature and real life. There is plenty of difference. Without the difference, literature would lose its meaning, in a way that real life—the actual experience of life and death—never does.

As Perluck shows, James's fiction is effective in part because we feel the passage of real life in the *detachment* that we feel from it, and which the act of reading represents and reproduces. But James's fiction is effective in greater part because it does not leave us without obliterating this detachment. In spite of Marcher, in spite of James, and in spite of our act of reading, "The Beast in the Jungle" transgresses its own nature as literature to achieve the right to death. It does so in its contact with a living being—which is to say, in the act of narration. Its strength lies in its ability to restore us, even as we enter the world where death is an impossibility, to our mortal lives. James's fiction is the dramatic antithesis to the thesis he supports in "Is There a Life After Death?" What we feel at the end of "The Beast in the Jungle," before we can remark the feeling, is a loss of self-consciousness—of the artist's and reader's power to know themselves by certain signs.

In the graveyard, with death all around him, figuration and reality merge for Marcher: "He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb" (126-27). Turning, ourselves, away from the text and into being, we feel the presence of death. If only for a moment—a moment that has passed once we have felt it—the rush of the beast and Marcher's reaction to it have taken us out of the text. In the next moment, we find ourselves back in it—that is, back in the text—with the image of John Marcher, who, having "flung himself, face down" on May Bartram's tomb, cannot die and is interminably in it.

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