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In Possession of a Secret: Rhythms of Mastery and Surrender in "The Beast in the Jungle"

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The most common reading (or misreading) of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) runs somewhat as follows: John Marcher is the benighted author of his own sorry fate. Unable to see that it is up to him to bring about the major event for which he secretly feels destined, he never musters the courage to act and ends up a miserable failure. May Bartram, with whom he has shared his secret, is perceptive enough to see the nature of his problem, yet she cannot impart her insight to the obtusely self-absorbed Marcher during her lifetime. Only after May's death does Marcher come to realize her importance to him and see that she loved him. Too late, he understands that he should have acted by returning the passion she felt for him.

Thus summarized, the story is a romantic tale with a palatable moral. If only the hero had been less self-preoccupied, he would have responded to the love of this warm and selfless woman.¹ Or, with a slightly different emphasis, if only the hero had not dreamed in such lofty terms of a strikingly rare destiny, he would have embraced the worthwhile opportunities offered by common reality.² A recent variation on this romantic-moral reading has proposed a less palatable moral, suggesting that Marcher's problem is panic in the face of homosexual desire. If only the hero had admitted this sexual possibility, the reasoning is, he could have been liberated for a fulfilling erotic life.³

These interpretations are certainly appealing. Perhaps their greatest attraction resides in their allegorical simplicity. A neat opposition is suggested between a selfishly blind Marcher, "stupidly" waiting for a special fate, meanwhile demonstrating "the chill of his egotism," and a selflessly loving May, standing by helplessly as Marcher's "kind, wise keeper" (Berthold 134). The reader is placed **[End Page 17]** in the agreeable position of being able to see through Marcher's delusion and to appreciate May's painful insight into her friend's condition. We can see that the secret which Marcher possesses and so carefully protects is in fact a secret that possesses him--and through him also May. Both are reduced to wretched servants of an all-consuming secret.

There are a number of problems, though, with this way of summarizing the reader's apprehension of the story. We should note, for instance, that the phrases just quoted to characterize Marcher and May can all be traced to Marcher's consciousness. This is most problematical with regard to our understanding of May's kindness, wisdom, and protectiveness, which is suspiciously close to Marcher's perception of her throughout the story. We may seem to be on safer ground in adopting Marcher's self-assessment at the end of the story, from which the descriptions of his stupidity and selfishness have been borrowed. Yet, a few critics have questioned whether Marcher really does reach the insight there with which he is usually credited. Jones has wondered whether Marcher's focus on his chilling egotism is not yet another way of compulsively marking his own distinction from common humanity (233). Harris is sure that Marcher remains blind to the end: "Marcher does not fail to live, love, suffer; with his consciousness trained obsessively on the future, he fails to realize that he has lived, loved, suffered and that he is continuing to do so with every breath he takes" (152). Is the story, then, such a clear-cut allegory of the "unlived life," embodied in Marcher (Berthold 129), versus "the good, the desirability, of love and sexuality," exemplified by May (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 196)? Is it a morality tale in which Marcher stands for "a man obsessed

with metaphor," who "flees in terror from ordinary human contact" (Yeazell 167), while May is "a devoted companion who represents the possibility of a more fruitful life" (Gargano 160)?

I propose that we move away from the stark oppositions that are prevalent in the allegorizing, romantic-moral interpretation of the story--its tendency to cast Marcher as the "cannibalistic" villain of the story and May as his powerless victim (Hocks 82)--and that we undertake instead a reading that is attentive to what Bersani has called "a certain rhythm of mastery and surrender in the human psyche" (98). Such a rhythm, I will argue, needs to be traced not just to the psychology of the main protagonist. To give an individual psychological account of John Marcher only would be to miss the (more generally psychological) rhythms of the story.⁴ The twin desire for mastery and surrender, I contend, is more deeply inscribed in the story's character constellation.⁵ Both Marcher and May at times strive to master their environment by constructing a (secret) narrative that asserts their own heroism and power, thus reducing the other to the passive role of a reader, merely seeking to interpret the story that someone else has written. Yet, both at other times seem to surrender the invasive claims of their own ego quite willingly, acquiescing to the role of reader of the other's narrative and submitting to the authorial power enjoyed by the other.

To approach "The Beast in the Jungle" from such a perspective will require a number of adjustments to the predominant perception of the story. We will need to accept, for one thing, that James's tale invites us to read John Marcher's secret not merely as an incapacitating delusion but also as an empowering force: his **[End Page 18]** possession of a secret endows Marcher with a productive sense of mastery over his environment. His view of himself as one who is in possession of a secret--the "real truth" about him--should not be cursorily dismissed by readers who themselves believe they are in possession of the superior truth (or secret) that Marcher is in fact possessed by a secret he cannot control. For another, we will have to dethrone May Bartram from the saintly position (selfless and powerless) she has hitherto occupied virtually unchallenged. Reconsidering the distribution of mastery and surrender in the story will enable us to reassert and extend Banta's assessment that "May Bartram, too, has had everything from the moment she 'had' Marcher's secret life of consciousness. She is no angelic woman whose good love has no ambition but to save a man if it could. She is the passionate virgin who completely possessed another's consciousness" (211). Indeed, May is herself possessed quite as much by a secret that she cannot control. Her secret sexual desire drives her first to submit to Marcher's view of reality and later on to take control of Marcher's consciousness, compelling it to direct its attention towards herself, and bringing it to full surrender by the close of the story.

The story's opening section has generally been read as an exposition of Marcher's irredeemable isolation and self-centeredness. Here is a man who feels pitifully "lost in the crowd" (*BJ* 496) and "finds this anonymity unbearable" (Edel 134). Moreover, his recollections of his first encounter with May Bartram, ten years prior to the renewed meeting with which the tale opens, are proved quite wrong by his more perceptive, less self-absorbed friend. But the problem with this version is that it ignores the pleasure that Marcher takes in both of these facts. As the narrator puts it, Marcher belonged to a "party of visitors [at a country house] . . . thanks to whom it was his theory, as always, that he was lost in the crowd" (496). The experience is positively charged ("thanks to") because the presence of "the crowd" allows Marcher to confirm his "theory" that he is deeply but imperceptibly different from it. He is "lost" in it because his difference is not noticed by anyone, but Marcher can redeem this state of affairs by means of his "theory" that his specialness *will* go unremarked. Marcher is here pictured as the author of a highly useful narrative ("theory") about his life--one that lends a gratifying sense of distinction, without one's having anything "to do, to achieve in the world, to be distinguished or admired for" (503). Marcher thus needs the "crowd," "the world . . . vulgar and vain," not in order to shine publicly before it, but to be reminded privately of his "distinction" from it (535).

Considered in this light, the theory-of-the-secret that Marcher has constructed seems to be a straightforward means of achieving mastery. His is a desire for a form of interaction with the world that has done away with the danger of any troublesome intervention from that world ("he needed to wander apart to feel in a proper relation with [it]" [496]). To invent the secret existence of a lurking Beast as a way of privately distinguishing oneself as special is to have hit upon a near-foolproof (because unchallengeable) method of asserting one's uniqueness--one's possession of an ego that is sharply differentiated from that of others, to the point of lending one "distinction" (a word that carries the double meaning of separateness and superiority). Yet, if we take a closer look at the nature of Marcher's secret, we are faced with a paradox. When Marcher insists that the **[End Page 19]** Beast is something he is "to wait for--to have to meet, to face, to see suddenly break out in my life" (503), he is actually surrendering the source of his superior uniqueness to a power that is located outside himself. And when that Beast is further figured as "possibly destroying all further

consciousness, possibly annihilating me" (503-04), it seems obvious that the idea with which Marcher is toying here--an idea that he has clearly invented out of a desire for mastery over existence--is of a loss of self, a dissolution of the boundaries of the ego ("annihilating me"). The unique, "overwhelming" fate that Marcher projects for himself (504) would amount to the very obliteration of his ego, of his own "apart"-ness. It would consist in a fusing of himself with the objective world. That one part of Marcher fears such an event is clear and is what most interpretations of the story have concentrated on. I want to demonstrate that another part of Marcher craves such a surrender of the autonomous self. That part wins out in the final scene, but it has been in evidence from the very moment Marcher meets May Bartram--in whom, by virtue of the same rhythm of mastery and surrender, the desire for submission to Marcher's self-constructed ego is quite as strongly balanced by a need to achieve control over it.

In Marcher, this double movement is evident as early as the opening scene. When he happens to meet his old acquaintance May Bartram, he is at first pleasurably occupied with constructing stories about her in his mind, "devot[ing] more imagination to her than to all the others put together," and is confident that "he . . . had thereby penetrated to a kind of truth that the others were too stupid for" (497-98).⁶ Marcher applies to May the exact same procedure that he is in the habit of using in order to shore up his view of himself as somehow very special. About her too he invents a story which is organized around a key truth that is clear to him, yet illegible to the crowd. In other words, Marcher is here capable of extending to another human being the kind of interest that he generally takes in himself. In the course of their subsequent conversation, Marcher is quick to offer his recollections of their joint past, each of which May cheerfully rejects as incorrect. "He accepted her amendments, he enjoyed her corrections, though the moral of them was, she pointed out, that he *really* didn't remember the least thing about her; and he only felt it as a drawback that when all was made comfortable to the truth there didn't appear much of anything left" (499). Marcher's attempted authorship of their shared history meets a powerful match in May's critical readership and in her tendency to undertake revisionary exercises ("amendments," "corrections") on his text.

We should also observe, though, that Marcher "accepted" and even "enjoyed" May's revisions. There is, consequently, more at stake here than can be accommodated in a romantic-moral reading, which, at its most interesting, would understand Marcher's failure to recollect accurately as indicative of a selfish preoccupation with what might happen in the future, to the exclusion even of any reliable awareness of what has happened in the past (cf. Przybylowicz 89-90). The unlikelihood of this explanation is apparent as soon as we realize that the one major event that May and Marcher turn out to have shared is his divulgence of the very secret that would, on this account, *make* him so forgetful of the past and so obsessed with the future. The point of Marcher's inability to recall the earlier event is rather **[End Page 20]** to heighten the power of the event that we are now witnessing and to underline the extent to which it is controlled throughout by May Bartram, without Marcher's resenting this. In fact, one may even note that it is May who, at Marcher's request, puts into words (for the first time in the story) the nature of the special fate that Marcher secretly feels awaits him (*BJ* 503). Having first paid her the honor of devoting his powerful imagination to her, Marcher now seems to be offering May a first chance to take over as author of the secret story, and he begins to adjust his own role accordingly, adopting something of the stance of a reader.

What is more, Marcher is filled with "wonder" and "surprise" at her knowledge, yet also with a "sweet" sense of "luxury" at her thus being "in possession" (502). The text is quite explicit both on the pleasure he derives from the situation and on the uneven distribution of power in it, as when Marcher responds "helplessly" or "shook his head in complete surrender" (503). What seems to be happening here can be captured well by placing it in the context of "the particular psychoanalytic inflection in a philosophy of power [to the effect] that the project of mastery might generate a pleasure--a thrill--incompatible with invasive appropriation. The psychoanalytic thematizing of the pursuit and renunciation of mastery as sadism and masochism gives a kind of ideal visibility to this double movement" (Bersani 99).⁷ If Marcher's initial reaction to May's reappearance in his life was largely one of "invasive appropriation" (as James puts it: he had "*penetrated* to a kind of truth about her"), seeking to master her chance entry by his usual strategies of control, he is now experiencing the intertwined emotion produced by the renunciation of mastery--that helplessness of "complete surrender" which "began, even if rather strangely, to taste sweet to him" (*BJ* 503). Marcher's attitude here seems close to what Bersani calls "the masochistic thrill of being invaded by a world we have not yet learned to master . . . an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject's potential for a jouissance in which the subject is momentarily undone" (100).⁸

By the end of the first conversation between Marcher and May, the latter has come to enjoy a

crucial position with regard to the success of the story Marcher has been telling himself. Pondering the nature of his destiny, they raise the possibility that what was to happen to Marcher was love. He dismisses this, observing about an affair he had: "It hasn't been overwhelming" (*BJ* 504). When May responds, "Then it hasn't been love," she is clearly acting as the reader and critic of the story Marcher is elaborating. Yet his further comment, "It was agreeable, it was delightful, it was miserable," seems convincing enough as a short characterization of a love affair. ⁹ "But it wasn't strange," Marcher continues his objection to this answer to his riddle. However, the demand for strangeness seems to be contradicted when he affirms that "*The* thing will of itself appear natural." May, the reader, spots the inconsistency, asking: "Then how will it appear strange?" Whereupon Marcher, the writer, hands over the interpretation of his story to the critic(s):

"It won't--to *me*."

"To whom then?"

"Well," he replied, smiling at last, "say to you." (504-05) **[End Page 21]**

Note that it is only now that Marcher feels able to smile--we might say, when he begins "to renounce the project of mastery for the sake of pleasure." This redefined relationship is then consolidated in the concluding part of their initial exchange over the issue of Marcher's fear. As many as three times Marcher avoids answering May's question, repeated word for word: "Are you afraid?" To the third query he responds with a question of his own that in effect demands her interpretation:

"Did I tell you I was--at Naples?"

"No, you said nothing about it."

"Then I don't know. And I should *like* to know," said John Marcher. "You'll tell me yourself whether you think so. If you'll watch with me you'll see." (505)

What has most often been highlighted about this scene is May's selfless and loving willingness to join the narcissistic Marcher in his wake. Krupnick has undertaken an attempt at such a reading within a specifically psychoanalytic framework, finding May to act "as the priestess in [Marcher's] self-idolatry" and assessing Marcher's "investment of attention and libido in himself" as tantamount to an "impenetrable narcissism" (114-15). Such a perspective on the dynamics of their relationship has a lot to be said for it. The roots of narcissism, like those of sadomasochism, are, for Freud, readily traceable to non-pathological human impulses ("The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats"), leading him to wonder: "what makes it necessary at all for our mental life to pass beyond the limits of narcissism and to attach the libido to objects" ("On Narcissism" 32, 28). The answer he gives--"this necessity arises when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount" (28)--might furthermore be applied to the event of Marcher's renewed meeting with May Bartram. This irruptive occurrence disturbs the balance of Marcher's sexual economy, adding the libido of another person to his own--the excess resulting from both cathexes now being directed at him. Likewise, Freud's observation that "it seems very evident that another person's narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are in search of object-love" (31-32) offers a suggestive ground of explanation for what has always puzzled critics of "The Beast in the Jungle": what is it that attracts May Bartram to this self-centered man? ¹⁰ Yet the phrase "who have renounced part of their own narcissism" is also reminiscent of the description that we have been giving of the masochistic drive, where a certain form of mastery is surrendered for the sake of pleasure. Indeed, towards the end of his discussion of Marcher's narcissism Krupnick notes, as something of an afterthought, that "James's art in this tale is an art of masochism" (118).

"The Beast in the Jungle," we could simply say, displays a keen awareness of the *economical* nature of psychological interaction: a narcissistic impulse is sought out by someone in search of object-love; a drive for mastery is matched by one for submission; such impulses may also alternate within the same person. When these opposed drives meet in James's work, they tend to result not in **[End Page 22]** dynamic resolution (of the boy-meets-girl type), but in the relative stasis of "vicious circles" (Poole 110), or even in the absolute stasis of death (as in "The Beast in the Jungle"). As Poole argues, James's "later work finds forms of representation that . . . actively

stress the inevitable reciprocity of power, whereby it is never simply given or taken but constantly passing between donors and beneficiaries, predators and prey. It is not always easy to know which is which" (1). ¹¹ At the end of section 1, the relationship between May Bartram and John Marcher already displays such a complex intermingling. When she agrees to watch with Marcher for the Beast, Bartram is certainly submitting to Marcher's obsession. She steps into the self-constructed fictional world of which he is the master and does so out of a desire for object-love, which the narcissistic Marcher amply fulfils. Yet, what is at least as remarkable is the extent to which Marcher at the same moment actively *surrenders* his story to May. She is to enjoy the power of determining both when the Beast shall have sprung and whether or not Marcher shall have succumbed to fear in the face of its springing; ¹² he is to have the pleasure of being loved and of being submitted to her control.

Section 2, which covers the longest period of narrated time ("while they grew older together" [BJ 511]), thus has Marcher describe the agreeable sense that May "was all the while looking at his life, judging it, measuring it, in the light of the thing she knew, . . . 'the real truth' about him" (509). Expert and active critic that she is, "she traced his unhappy perversion through portions of its course into which he could scarcely follow it" (510). Properly interpreting him, "she was in the secret of the difference between the forms he went through . . . and the detachment that reigned beneath them and that made of all behaviour, all that could in the least be called behaviour, a long act of dissimulation" (510). So perfect a critic is she, that she begins to emulate Marcher: "she had in fact a wonderful way of making it seem . . . the secret of her own life too" (510): "Beneath *her* forms as well detachment had learned to sit, and behaviour had become for her, in the social sense, a false account of herself" (511). Like Marcher, May begins to cultivate a secret, a "real truth" about herself (511). "There was but one account of her that would have been true all the while, and that she could give, directly, to nobody, least of all to John Marcher" (511). The secret May so jealously guards, only ever intimating it to Marcher, is of course the desire she feels for a full erotic relationship in which not only her desire to love would be gratified but also her desire to be loved.

As soon as the demands of her own secret thus begin to intermingle with her interpretation of Marcher's, May turns from the kind of critic that every writer dreams of finding (finely responsive to the author's mastery) into the kind that every writer dreads stumbling upon (harshly penetrating and grossly judgmental). Driven by her secret desire for a type of "intercourse" with Marcher of which more could be said than that "[i]t simply existed" (508), May begins to judge Marcher's passivity, finding (like later critics of the story) that it falls short of what he could have achieved not only for himself but also for her. When, on the occasion of her birthday, Marcher says he feels "'so tremendously grateful for all you've done for me'" and wonders aloud "'if it's quite fair'" that he has asked her to wait with him all these years, May avoids answering this question but manages to unsettle **[End Page 23]** Marcher's calm complacency concerning the fact that the Beast, after all these quiet years, still has not reared its head (512). (Most previous critics, e.g., Yeazell [167], assume that Marcher has been getting frantic with fear, but that is far from true.) Asking him whether *he* doesn't feel that he has to wait too long, he answers philosophically: "No, I'm just where I was about it. . . . It's in the lap of the gods. One's in the hands of one's law--there one is" (513). Indeed, for Marcher, the secret is still productive of a distinction that sets him almost divinely apart ("in the lap of the gods") from what May agrees are the "vulgar," "men in general" (512). But at this point May stops being a mere reader-critic and begins to assume the role of writer-creator herself. She now gradually becomes the one in need of interpretation by Marcher, for instance when she shakes her head "slowly, but rather inscrutably" (513) or when she intimates that she knows what Marcher's secret is really all about but predicts that he will never find out (515). In adopting this far more active and teasing role, she will go on to reawaken in Marcher "his original fear, if fear it had been," a fear that seemed to have "lost itself in the desert" (514). May's intimation "that she 'knew' something and that what she knew was bad--too bad to tell him" (517) arouses in Marcher the first renewed stirrings of fear, this time named as "a dread of losing her" (518). Indeed, faced with the likelihood of May's imminent death due to "a deep disorder in her blood," Marcher realizes (by the end of section 3, exactly halfway through the story) that he has become utterly dependent on her presence to give meaning to the narrative of his existence. While he is convinced "that there was nothing she could 'know,' after all, any better than he did," Marcher yet has to admit that May might share with women in general an ability to "ma[k]e out things, where people were concerned, that the people often couldn't have made out for themselves" (518).

One thing that Marcher cannot make out for himself is that May has by this stage begun to derive such erotic pleasure from the relationship as Marcher's libidinal economy leaves room for. To put it bluntly, if she cannot make him love her for herself, she will redirect his interest in himself and his

secret by casting herself into the role of possessor of that secret, and hence into that of Master of his universe. In other words, if May's initial investment in Marcher's story was masochistically inflected (involving the surrender of her own ego to the demands of his masterplot), it has become 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. ¹³ "What did everything mean," Marcher wonders anxiously, "--what, that is, did *she* mean . . ." (520).

The latter half of the tale is made up of Marcher's increasingly frantic efforts not so much to find out what the Beast is as to find out what May meant when she intimated she knew something. Section 4 of the story consists almost wholly of a conversation in which Marcher tries to extract information from May (masterfully "serene, exquisite, but impenetrable" [521]), appealing to her out of his reawakened fear: "'I'm only afraid of ignorance now--I'm not afraid of knowledge'" (524). May, for her part, has lost any interest in interpreting the book of Marcher's fiction and devotes any energy that she has left to a final, silent attempt to make Marcher understand the story that *she* has to tell--undertaking, as it were, a final revision of that story in the face of death. What she does is to try and **[End Page 24]** communicate her love without breaking her own secret. As Marcher will realize at the end of the story, "pale, ill, wasted" that May was, "she had risen from her chair to stand before him and let him imaginably guess" (540). He doesn't guess (arguably because the truth she is holding out to him is primarily her *own* truth rather than the key to his riddle), and when she turns away from him he is left with "the fear that she would die without giving him light" (527).

The imagery of the scene is quite as sexually charged as that of the final one of the story. If Sedgwick has rightly identified "a slightest potential of Whitmanian cruisiness" in the latter (*Epistemology* 210) and Tompkins has called its quality "orgasmic" (191), then the former too seems subtly suggestive of a sexual climax. Significantly, it is impossible to determine whether the intensity of this climax is produced by the exertion of power or by surrender to it. As the narrator puts it,

what [Marcher] saw in her face was the truth, . . . dreadful [and] inordinately soft. . . .
[T]hey continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact
imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind, but all expectant. [Having closed her
eyes, she] gave way at the same instant to a slow, fine shudder [while] he remained
staring . . . stared, in fact, but the harder. (BJ 527)

In the context of the flow of power and sexual energy that we have so far been tracing, it seems quite possible to read this scene--with its imagery of hardness and softness, of pressure and release--as a discharge of May's libidinal energy, a sexual dying that immediately precedes her literal dying. The emphasis on Marcher's continuing hardness would then suggest that he cannot, here, find such a release. Considering this aspect of the scene's imbalance, we might even conclude that May's experience is auto-erotically based on the twin elements of Marcher's (invasive, i.e., sadistic) "hard"ness and his (submissive, i.e., masochistic) "stare" of "kind" and "expectant" incomprehension. Fittingly, the rhythms of mastery and surrender are present in all their complexity at one of the most climactic moments of the plot. To the extent that the faint auto-eroticism is readable as a narcissistic moment, we could even indicate a chiasmic development, whereby May has come to take over more and more of Marcher's initial role, while he will go on to surrender completely such narcissism and mastery as he still retains.

There is a final interpretative moment at the beginning of section 5, when May goes out of her way to reassure a non-comprehending Marcher that he need not wait any longer for his Beast, since "'It *has* come'" (529). Her statement makes sense within the narrative that she has been developing: the love story in which the loved one would have responded to a good woman's secret love and in which the Beast springs when Marcher fails to produce that kind of love. But her statement is incomprehensible from the perspective of the narrative in which Marcher had always imagined himself featured: the story of a man whose secret distinction from the crowd consists in a fate so rare that he couldn't possibly make it happen to himself. Having gradually handed over the power to write the story of his life to his companion May Bartram, Marcher is by now reduced to trying to decipher a secret narrative that is not properly his own, yet that seems to promise access to **[End Page 25]** the real truth about him. May becomes all powerful in his life. "She visibly knew that she knew, and the effect on him was of something co-ordinate, in its high character, with the law that had ruled him. It was the true voice of the law; so on her lips would the law itself have sounded" (529). No longer able to find sustenance in a "theory" of his own, Marcher can only sit at the feet of the sphinx that May seems to have become at the end of her life (521) and hope to receive from her lips the law of his life. The law is hard. Though May is talking about the Beast, she might just as well be talking about Marcher's life when she insists that "'It's past. It's behind. . . .

Before, you see, it was always to *come*. That kept it present." Marcher's response confirms the reading I have thus far been developing: ". . . it seems to me I liked it better present" (531). Indeed, the Beast that Marcher believed in was never an unpleasant presence; to the contrary, it was what lent distinction to his existence; it was what gave him a sense of mastery. Only in May's revisionary and all too interested version of Marcher's story could one regard with relief the fact that the Beast (her Beast) has finally sprung.

When May dies shortly after having sounded his "law," Marcher seems to have lost everything. For one thing, the absence of any official bond between them deprives him of "the distinction, the dignity . . . of the man markedly bereaved" (533). Another unpleasant closure is the disappearance of his Beast: "now that the Jungle had been threshed to vacancy and that the Beast had stolen away," Marcher has to deal with "the extinction in his life of the element of suspense" (533). The phrase serves to underline the positive charge that his secret had held for him all along, as does also the narrator's observation that "Marcher waded through his beaten grass . . . very much as if vaguely looking for the Beast, and still more as if missing it" (534). The one who has deprived him of his precious Beast is of course May Bartram. "She had told him . . . not to guess; she had forbidden him . . . to know, and she had even in a sort denied the power in him to learn . . ." (534). And it is also May who has played havoc with Marcher's sense of time, making him "as little able to know a fear for his future as to know a hope. . . . He was to live entirely with the other question, that of his unidentified past . . ." (534).

As was also true of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, May Bartram's moment of greatest vindication comes after death (section 6).¹⁴ After a year of travelling in a vain attempt to retrieve his sense of distinction, Marcher has returned to May's grave to recollect "his rare experience" and reconstruct the old fiction of the real "truth" about himself, "if not for a crowd of witnesses," then at least, as always, for "John Marcher" himself (536-37).

It was as if, being nothing anywhere else for anyone, nothing even for himself, he were just everything here . . . by clear right of the register that he could scan like an open page. The open page was the tomb of his friend, and *there* were the facts of the past, there the truth of his life, there the backward reaches in which he could lose himself. (537)

Notice that the success of his narrative is expressed very much as before: "he could lose himself." But the sense given to the phrase has perceptibly changed. Marcher no longer loses himself in a crowd from which he nevertheless feels **[End Page 26]** distinct; he now loses himself in the page formed by May's tomb. Not only is his fiction still utterly dependent on her role as writer of his story, the dependency seems to have progressed to a further stage. Marcher's entire sense of self has now become reliant on what the narrator calls the "positive resource" that her grave has become for him, "dependent on it not only for a support but for an identity" (536-37). Indeed, the distinction between his own ego and May's has become difficult to draw. When he hastens back to her grave, he is said to be "getting back, as he might put it, into his own presence. . . . [H]e had been separated so long from the part of himself that alone he now valued" (536). Marcher seems to be courting here "the masochistic thrill . . . in which the subject is momentarily undone"--a "self-shattering" [that] disrupts the ego's coherence and dissolves its boundaries" (Bersani 100-01). We can no longer discern where May's "resource" stops and Marcher's "identity" begins, where the line of demarcation between their two "presence[s]" is to be drawn.

The resourceful fiction that Marcher has now constructed (and which is called, as at the beginning, "Marcher's theory" [BJ 538]) depends on a secret intimacy between himself and May, the only person who "*knew* of his rare experience" (536). This intimacy is staged both as a continuity between their identities and in terms of an eroticized relationality--as when Marcher imagines himself wandering "round and round" May, figured as a "presence . . . whose eyes . . . never ceased to follow him, and whose seat was his point, so to speak, of orientation" (537). The insertion of the disjunct ("so to speak") serves to draw attention to the sexual pun in the preceding clause even as it unsettles its interpretation. Without the aid of the disjunct, the reader might not have detected a sexual dimension to the attention that Marcher steadily "point[s]" at May's "seat"; with the disjunct in place, an identification of May's "seat" and Marcher's "point"--and hence a blurring of sexual identity and ego boundaries--offers itself as a likely interpretation. Indeed, if May's seat is now Marcher's point then such (phallic) mastery as can still be attained actually feeds on a loss of self (and hence a surrender of mastery): "Thus in short he settled to live--feeding only on the sense that he once *had* lived" (537). What we are witnessing is an intriguing realization of that relative stasis of the vicious circle ("round and round") in which the opposed drives of mastery and surrender often seem to result in James's work. Given, furthermore, that the center of that

circle is formed by a dead person (that May's tomb provides the only remaining sense of life), the fact that the story ends with Marcher's act of flinging himself onto May's grave, seeking the absolute stasis of death itself, is not surprising.

In order to bring Marcher to that stage, James introduces once more an "accident": a "chance" meeting with another mourning man, whose passionate grief shrilly contrasts with Marcher's "smooth habit of the scene" (537, 539). If, as I think we should, we want to follow Sedgwick in highlighting the "erotic possibilities of the connection between the men," then we should also note its explicitly violent character (*Epistemology* 210). The rival mourner's "face . . . looked into Marcher's own . . . with an expression like the cut of a blade. He felt it, that is, so deep down that he winced at the steady thrust": it was as though he were being "mutely assaulted" (*BJ* 538). Sedgwick misses this violence when she **[End Page 27]** claims that the erotic possibilities here "appear to be all open" (*Epistemology* 210). It seems, rather, that the only sexual event that could ensue is a sadomasochistic one, in which Marcher would be assuming the position of Slave to the other man's Master. Yet I think Silverman is right to draw our attention to another dimension of the encounter, which her account captures better than Sedgwick's: "Because the dead lover for whom the strange man mourns is never represented except through a strong structural parallel to May Bartram, the latter in effect stands in for the former. Together Bartram and the stranger comprise the passionate heterosexual couple of the classic primal scene" (172).¹⁵

What happens at the simplest level is that the fantasized intimacy between Marcher and May is destroyed. Another person comes to disturb their secret unity as participants in an intersubjective libidinal economy of mastery and surrender. *How* Marcher inscribes himself into the primal scene with which he is here confronted depends on which of these pulsating rhythms reigns his response.¹⁶ To the extent that Marcher still possesses an impulse to mastery (which has come to rest, though, on a rather shaky foundation), he would be capable of identifying with the rival mourner's control of the imagined sexual event. Yet, to do so, Marcher would have to abandon that artful fiction of a continuity between himself and May on which his sense of identity has now come to depend. To the extent that his impulse to surrender predominates, as seems more likely, he identifies with the object of the violent mourner's sexual energy: May in the fantasized scenario. We might even speculate that the near-fusion of Marcher's self with May's has made it impossible for him to think himself apart from her. In other words, the blurred boundaries of his masochistic self could well be sufficient to produce that "possibility of *desire for the man*" that Sedgwick has correctly identified (*Epistemology* 211). To read the moment in this way, however, is to question the relevance of the terms homo- and heterosexual for the flow of libidinal energy in James's story.

The breakdown of Marcher's sense of "distinction" is made complete in the tale's final paragraph, where Marcher relives "that twilight of the cold April" when May offered herself to him in the fullness of her "passion" (*BJ* 540). If our analysis of the original event was correct and Marcher was unable at the time to share the release of libidinal energy that May could experience, then we must be struck by the very different character of the present moment. Indeed, Jane Tompkins has scrutinized the style of the closing paragraphs and found these to be "charged with the force of pent-up feeling that has finally been released": "The hard-won syntactic resolutions, delayed by frustrating qualifications, share, by virtue of their intensity and the sense they afford of welcome relief, the orgasmic nature of the story's conclusion" (189, 191). What I believe happens here is that Marcher finally identifies to such a degree with May that he is able fully to relive the April afternoon from her perspective. If, in section 5, he surrendered his theory-of-the-secret under pressure of the Law that sounded from May's dying lips (the pun may stand), Marcher is now finally ready to possess and be possessed by May's secret. He has discovered the key to his secret as May saw it--the fact that he was "*the man to whom nothing on earth was to have happened*"--and he feels as strongly victimized by this secret as she did (*BJ* 540). Adopting her sense **[End Page 28]** of its horror, Marcher responds by trying "to fix it and hold it; he kept it there before him so that he might feel the pain" (540-41). Masochistically seeking out the pain of powerlessness, Marcher's release of pent-up libidinal energy takes place in exactly the same context as had May's. And, as with May, so too does Marcher's sexual climax inexorably lead to the tomb: "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. . . . [H]e flung himself, on his face, on the tomb" (541). We have the masochistic, ego-dissolving culmination to a chiasmic structure in which May's sadistic, controlling power reduces Marcher to reenacting her own desire-driven narrative in all its intricacies. The climax involves the complete disappearance of the distinguished self Marcher had invented and his full surrender to May, metonymically represented by her tomb, the only material presence that is left of the woman who has come to master the story of his life.

Far from being a mere formalistic device, the chiasmic structure that I have been tracing in "The

"Beast in the Jungle" suggests a view of sexual identity, and even of identity as such, that is intensely interpersonal. The sharpest (and most acrid) realization of this Jamesian perspective is perhaps to be found in that major novel *manqué*, *The Sacred Fount*, whose narrator, in Sharon Cameron's words, "thinks that either the man or the woman of each couple that he sees exacts life by draining it from the sacred fount of the other [and tries] to deduce . . . who is living at the expense of whom" (160). Identity of the one person here almost literally feeds off the other, yet it is unclear who is the "one," who the "other." Likewise, there is ultimately no determining who is the masochist, who the sadist, in the pulsating sadomasochistic "erotonomy" (Cooper) that James stages in "The Beast in the Jungle." We may delineate shifting emphases within that interpersonal sexual economy--changes in the roles assumed--but the most dramatic scenes, as we saw, derive their greatest interest from the intertwined nature of these roles, from their availability for adoption by more than one character.

Here, I believe, we come closest to an appreciation of the deep mystery that continues to attach to so much of James's fictional reality, a mystery that is rooted in his take on identity. It may not so much be that, as Posnock puts it, James is committed to "nonidentity thinking"--"a mode of thinking and acting that conceives of individualism, identity, and consciousness as historical categories open to change and revision in a nonpossessive direction" (82-83). Such a perspective seems altogether too liberal-minded when confronted with a story like "The Beast in the Jungle," which surely has more to say on the possessive, manipulative, self-serving urges that underlie the desire to "change and revis[e]" identity than on the link Posnock discerns between shifting identities and social "tolerance and flexibility" (83).¹⁷ To deal with this problem, Posnock has to dismiss Marcher as "that most insulated of Jamesian selves" (326) and disregard the many ways in which the story dramatizes Marcher's "surrender," "mimetic selfhood" and "masochism"--qualities all that Posnock elsewhere applauds under the rubric of Jamesian nonidentity (228, 167, 245).

Identity, in James, does exist, but it is so strongly rooted in mimesis, so often constituted within a relationship, that we can regard it as existing, somewhat mysteriously, *in-between* persons rather than defining any one individual in an **[End Page 29]** isolating manner.¹⁸ What is more, identity cannot simply be equated with mastery: it is made up quite as much of surrender. Thus, in *The American Scene*, James approvingly discusses the presence of fences in Harvard Yard as an instance of

the way in which the formal enclosure of objects at all interesting immediately refines upon their interest, immediately establishes values. . . . This resembles, in the human or social order, the improved situation of the foundling who has discovered his family or of the actor who has mastered his part. (407)

The simile in both cases implies that identity is determined by something outside oneself to which one willingly surrenders. The family is what the foundling accepts as an "enclosure" that will lend him an "improved" identity, while, to "[master] his part," the actor has to surrender his own identity--has to become, in a sense, a foundling without a family--and mimetically assume the part, accept the enclosure of another character. *The Wings of the Dove*, too, dramatizes the intricate interdependence of mastery and surrender in the constitution of identity. The term "surrender" may occupy a central place in the final scene of the novel, which is all about Densher's threatened "surrender to" Kate (i.e., his "surrender of" Milly's bequest, of which he wants no part), but what is really conspicuous here is Densher's unwonted mastery, his surprising control of the situation (20: 404). He is asserting a new-found identity that allows him not to surrender to Kate (i.e., marry her while accepting Milly's inheritance); instead, he can dictate terms to her and force her to choose between possessing the fortune she has worked so hard to secure and marrying him penniless as he wants to remain. However, in another twist, Densher masters Kate by surrendering to Milly: his masterful stance is the result of his adoption of Milly's loving view of him. Milly's bequest, coming as it does in spite of her awareness of his duplicitous behavior, transforms Densher into "the actor who has mastered his part"--that of Milly's lover, a role he had shown himself capable of performing, and which Milly's posthumous act now offers him a chance to perfect. At the moment when Densher is most in charge, his identity is therefore as dependent on Milly's cue as it used to be on Kate's.

Very similar paradoxes govern the final scene between Isabel Archer and Caspar Goodwood at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. They are most strikingly developed in the version James revised for the New York Edition, which highlights much more clearly than did the original draft the mimetic basis on which Isabel can turn surrender into mastery. Indeed, Isabel's decision to return to Rome, which has puzzled numerous readers, is not so hard to grasp once we realize that it is the very decisiveness with which Goodwood would bind Isabel to himself ("You don't know where to turn. Turn straight to *me*" [4: 433]) that endows James's heroine with the mimetic energy which enables

her to see the "very straight path" that leads back to Rome. "[I]t was extraordinarily as if, while she took [Caspar's kiss], she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession" (4: 436). Surrendering to Goodwood's "intense identity," Isabel is invigorated by "a flash that spread, and [End Page 30] spread again, and stayed," and is thus able to borrow that intensity, to mime that "hard manhood," and be liberated to move swiftly and decisively "from the spot." In other words, Goodwood's claim to straight mastery over Isabel perversely serves as the basis for her own assumption of control over her situation. Regarded in this light, Isabel's return to Rome may well see her adopt (perhaps only temporarily) a masterly posture in the sadomasochistic economy that rules her relationship to Osmond.¹⁹ James has his protagonist cross conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality in this crucial scene with Goodwood and implies that she can do so because of the interpersonal constitution of identity. As a result, this most explicitly erotic moment of the whole novel is in fact an intensely queer one--a man makes love to a woman who feels more of a man with every moment of erotic contact.

The works of James's that I have here briefly reviewed transgress the straight conception of sexual identity that underlies conventional notions of both hetero- and homosexuality. Such notions assume a constituted identity that is fully defined by its sexuality and that takes part in a relation of either difference or sameness. In the heterosexual case, a woman supposedly thinks: "I am x, he is y; we desire each other for being different," whereas in the lesbian/gay case, the two partners are thought to reason: "I am x, she/he is x; we desire each other for being the same." The Jamesian encounters that I have addressed are more typically represented by Isabel Archer's early response to Madame Merle: "I should like awfully to be so!" (PL 3: 270). Neither difference, nor sameness can adequately capture the operation of desire here. While the latter seems to be triggered by the difference Isabel perceives between herself and Serena Merle (despite the fact that both belong to the same sex), that difference, far from being enshrined as the necessary basis of the attraction, is something whose obliteration is ardently desired. Arguably, the two women's eroticized encounters chiastically result in an exchange of roles: Isabel will go on not only to reenact Serena's relationship to Osmond but also to play a maternal part vis-à-vis that woman's daughter; Madame Merle will be removed from the European stage that has now become Isabel's scene and exiled to the American theater where Mrs. Touchett had first discovered the young woman. If, in this foreshortened summary, the parameters x and y seem to be too neatly exchangeable--"I was x and have become y; she was y and has turned into x"--then the episode with Goodwood offers a less symmetrically balanced instance of the transformative magnetism that may be exerted by one identity on another.

"The Beast in the Jungle" may stand, then, as a particularly poignant illustration of the interpersonal and rhythmical constitution of identity in James, which rarely results in examples of straight behavior and frequently in queerly transgressive departures from sexual or moral normativity. It makes as little sense, therefore, to dismiss John Marcher as a repressed homosexual and self-centered monster as it does to promote May Bartram as an open-minded heterosexual and selfless idealist.

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Notes

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1. Bell calls Marcher "a man so self-preoccupied that he fails to perceive, much less appreciate, a generous woman's love" (262). For Berthold, Marcher is blind "to the necessity of healthy emotional involvement" (134). The moralizing slant of most approaches is quite pronounced. Wagenknecht, for instance, allows that Marcher's "is a failure of understanding rather than good intentions," yet sternly adds that "it is equally important to remember that this does not completely exonerate him" (147). In Bell's view, the story's "obvious moral [is] that egotism such as Marcher's deserves punishment" (262). Krupnick rightly summarizes that criticism of "The Beast in the

Jungle" "has long been limited by an insistently moral preoccupation with John Marcher's 'egotism' and 'failure to love'" (113).

2. Jones argues that Marcher "paces about, restless, never at home with himself, seeking an extraordinary conquest, figured as the slaying of the Beast, which will bring him 'distinction,'" and never understands that even his selfishness is merely something "he has in common with others" (229, 233).

3. "May Bartram from the first sees, correctly, that the possibility of Marcher's achieving a genuine ability to attend to a woman--sexually or in any other way--depends as an absolute precondition on the dispersion of his totalizing, basilisk fascination with and terror of homosexual possibility. It is only through his coming out of the closet . . . that Marcher could even begin to perceive the attention of a woman as anything other than a terrifying demand or a devaluing complicity" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 206-07).

4. This is the main weakness of Krupnick's reading, which is wholly concerned with Marcher's "melodrama of the narcissistic imagination" (115) .

5. I do not have the space here to examine how these rhythms operate in the relation of narrator and reader to the tale, nor to explore how they can be traced in the story's language.

6. In Bersani's psychoanalytical terms, Marcher is evincing a normal strategy for survival: "To survive in any environment requires a degree of invasive intent with respect to that environment; the exercise of power is a prerequisite for life itself" (99).

7. The psychopathological connotations of the terms sadism and masochism may seem intrusive rather than helpful in a discussion of "The Beast in the Jungle." However, Freud wrote that "[s]adism and masochism occupy a special position among the perversions, since the contrast between activity and passivity which lies behind them is among the universal characteristics of sexual life. . . . But the most remarkable feature of this perversion is that its active and passive forms are habitually found to occur together in the same individual" ("Three Essays" 87). A footnote added later announces that he has decided to "place [sadism and masochism] outside the class of the remaining 'perversions'" (88). A very valuable account of "the links between James's masochism and his positioning of himself as an artist" is McWhirter, which does not, however, consider "The Beast in the Jungle" (477).

8. This phase of the relationship can also be elucidated by considering it in the light of Derrida's reflections on the nature of "the event as gift, [and] the gift as event" (123): "To overtake the other with surprise, be it by one's generosity . . ., is to have a hold on him, as soon as he accepts the gift. The other is . . . overtaken, imprisoned, indeed poisoned [*Gift*] by the very fact that something happens to him in the face of which he remains--having not been able to foresee anything--defenseless, open, exposed. . . . Such violence may be considered the very condition of the gift, its constitutive impurity . . ." (147). Marcher's failure to recollect what took place between him and May allows her to "overtake" him with her knowledge, and in particular with the "generosity" of having kept his secret and sustained her interest in him. Marcher realizes that he now has "endless gratitude to make up" (*BJ* 503). Strangely, there is nowhere any sense that Marcher's act of placing his trust in May could be regarded as a gift from him to her. Marcher instead reflects: "To tell her what he had told her--what had it been but to ask something of her?" (503). So successful is May's control of the situation as the dispenser of the gift of knowledge that Marcher associates the "constitutive impurity" of the act of giving only with his original telling, whereas the surprising "generosity" of the gift is reserved for May's silence.

9. That large group of readers who simply say that Marcher has been so self-centered as to miss out on the ordinary pleasures of love have a problem here; they would have to claim for May a rather romantic status as Marcher's true love, thus in effect following Marcher in taking the issue out of the ordinary again.

10. Sedgwick has another explanation: May Bartram "seems the woman (don't we all know them?) who has not only the most delicate nose for but the most potent attraction toward men who are at crises of homosexual panic" (*Epistemology* 209).

11. Several of the key terms and images in "The Beast in the Jungle" are related to such an

economical view of human relations: Marcher's sense of "luxury" at May's being in "possession" of his secret (502); the "false account" that May gives of herself (511); the crucial question at the end of the tale: "What had the man *had* to make him, by the loss of it, so bleed and yet live?" (539).

12. Heyns similarly comments: "May's complete absorption in Marcher's history is not so much an extinction of her own self as an appropriation of his: her stifling self-abnegation relentlessly takes pity on the pathetic Marcher and takes possession of the helpless creature she has helped bring into being" (113). Heyns's account forms an interesting exception to the romantic-moral interpretive tendency. I am in broad agreement with his reading, yet cannot follow it completely in the emphasis it still places on the "ethical plot . . . by which [Marcher] is brought to full vision" (115).

13. I disagree with Krupnick's claim that to have May Bartram act as a "punishing agent" "wouldn't be Jamesian" (119). It is typical of the late James that an apparent victim should turn out to possess an aggressive streak. As Poole points out, one of the possibilities with which James's late work loves to toy is "to reverse the relations of pursuer and pursued. . . . [when] the fleeing figure turns on its pursuer. The action of *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* in each case hinges on such a moment of recognition and reversal, at which the victim--Strether, Milly, Maggie--turns on the aggressors" (137).

14. Indeed, the tale's kinship to *The Wings of the Dove* is great. Several critics, mistakenly, I believe, suggest *The Ambassadors* as the closer match. See, e.g., Bell 262, Yeazell 167, Crowley. A subtle counter example is Banta, who observes that May's "terrible mercy . . . comes [to Marcher] on the fierce wings of the dove" (211). See also Auchard 111-12 for an exploration of parallels and differences between Milly Theale and John Marcher.

15. Though her chapter on James opens with a reading of a few Freudian texts, among them "A Child is Being Beaten" and "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Silverman does not address the sadomasochistic rhythms in "The Beast in the Jungle," instead relating the violence to the "wound" of castration (174). Sedgwick (*Tendencies* 73-80 and 97-98) and Trask have taken issue with Silverman's reading. Sedgwick notes that, on Silverman's account,

[a]nal sexuality cannot happen in the absence of a figure labeled "female" and a fortiori, it would seem, cannot happen in the absence of a figure labelled "male": anal sex between men is never really between men, and anal sex between women is simply beyond imagination. (98)

Silverman, she feels, "tacitly installs the procreative monogamous heterosexual couple as the origin, telos, and norm of sexuality as a whole" (74). Trask writes: "Because Silverman refuses to see the operation of sexuality as other than penetrating/penetrated, active/passive, the anus is recapitulated as just another instance of the absence of the phallus" (108).

16. Silverman finds that the scene contains both "the desire to be sodomized by the 'father' while occupying the place of the 'mother,' and the desire to sodomize him while he is penetrating the 'mother'" (173). Her analysis relies heavily on technical language that finds only a faint echo in the tale itself. It is moreover strongly rooted in an object-theory of desire that theorists like Girard have critiqued, proposing instead a mimetic emphasis that seems more closely attuned to James's story.

17. Cameron places a distinctly different emphasis from Posnock's when she observes that, in James, "the purpose of thinking seems inseparable from manipulation" (150). I engage more fully with Posnock in *Henry James*, esp. 44-47, 51, and 58, as well as in "Possessing," esp. 168-69.

18. Cameron develops an interesting parallel to the perspective on identity that I am here suggesting, arguing that in *The Wings of the Dove*,

with the notable exception of Densher's picture of Milly, thinking is not private and it is not internal. . . . it appears to emanate from others, as in Mrs. Stringham's thinking of what Milly is thinking, or as in Milly's thinking of what the people in Regent's Park are thinking. . . . This disables our comprehension of thinking as a mental activity, rather locating it in some amorphous space, where changes can be wrought on it and where thinking is itself free to have effects that transcend the subjective, free to work changes. (150)

19. Jane Campion's screen version of the novel picks up on its sadomasochist dimension, yet does so reductively, turning Osmond into a gloating sadist, Isabel a frustrated masochist. James, however, who is more sensitive to the rhythmical quality of sadomasochism, shows that both Osmond and Isabel derive pleasure from a position of erotic power; both also enjoy the *jouissance* that the surrender of such power may entail.

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