

The Transition of the Metaphorical Meanings in “The Beast in the Jungle”

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Introduction

In Henry James's “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), John Marcher is always afraid of a terrible destiny and thinks of the happening as the “beast”. What the figurative word “beast” means has been argued and has become the central issue in solving the “fear” theme in this story. For instance, Krishna Baldev Vaid argues that the “beast” means “a fantastic embodiment of the central Jamesian theme of the unlived life.” (Vaid, 475) As for metaphor, Patricia Parker discusses, “At the beginning of his discussion of metaphor, Quintilian remarks that it ‘adds to the copiousness of language by the interchange of words and by borrowing, and finally succeeds in accomplishing the supremely difficult task of providing a name for everything’. *Metaphora* or *translatio*, then, is related to a primitive lack in language—a lack that the later description of catachresis will associate exclusively with it—and contributes to extending the empire of names.” (Parker, 62) According to this discussion, the “beast” in this novel means the metaphor which covers the lack of the hero's inner language, that is, his disability to express it or “knowing” it.

On the other hand, Northrop Frye discusses about metaphor as follows:

The complexities begin when we realize that metaphor, as a bridge between consciousness and nature, is in fact a microcosm of language itself. It is precisely the function of language to overcome what Blake calls the “cloven fiction” of a subject contemplating an object. In the nineteenth century the German philosopher Humboldt had arrived at the principle that language was a third order of reality, coming between subject and object. (Frye, 115)

Frye's suggestion leads us to think that metaphor is not only the product of our imagination but also the cause to stir our farther imagination. In this way, one

metaphor makes another metaphorical meaning. In "The Beast in the Jungle" the multiple meaning of the "beast" is always producing.

It has been generally considered that the theme of this story is the hero's "unlived life" and his egotistic will to want to be an onlooker who need not be aware of love or passion in the life. However, is Marcher really such an egotistic person? It can be interpreted that Marcher is simply too insensitive to understand other persons' feelings and is not sinful so much. Besides, is May Bartram a self-devoted woman who reminds Marcher of the secret which he told her ten years ago and who observes his "beast" together "for him"? Indeed it is Marcher who hits upon the idea of the terrible happening in his life, but it is May who actually constructs the happening or the destiny for him. Without May, Marcher never recalls his idea of the "beast" nor is insensitive to her love. In a sense, he cannot take advantage of May and is controlled by May. Gert Buelens also argues the point that Marcher is not selfish so much and that May is not always selfless:

His [Marcher's] 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. (Buelens, 19)

Both Marcher and May create the meaning of the "beast"; however, it is Marcher's point of view from which this story, including May's story, is told. Therefore, May's subjectivity is reduced and is dethroned as a less positive creator of a metaphor.

What does the "beast" mean for Marcher and May? Roland Barthes defines "écriture" as the opposite to "language". According to Barthes, "écriture" has its root on the foot of language and is the seed to develop later to reveal its secret meaning like a menace. The "beast" which Marcher constructs is also a kind of écriture which contains a seed-like secret to develop later. The "beast" is originally defined as some terrible occurrence and is the object of fear both for Marcher and May. Marcher recreates the meaning of the "beast", while May is

the first interpreter of the meaning of the “beast”. Marcher and May are, as Takayuki Tatumi says, like a writer and a reader who re-reads the writer’s story. And the writer re-writes the reader’s interpretation to search various possibility of its interpretation. In fact, the meaning of the “beast” continues to change one after another in this story. It’s remarkable that the more Marcher thinks about the “beast” the nearer the beast comes to him. The “beast” makes an attack both on Marcher and May who observes the meaning of the “beast” together. If Marcher missed his life, May also could be influenced by his “missing”. That is, May has been waiting for being noticed by Marcher about her one-sided love to end her life. It can be said that May’s unhappiness is caused by Marcher’s insensitivity. However, even if May’s love is not rewarded, she knows her own will to love Marcher and lives on it. The point that she knows her own will is a decisive difference from Marcher who is never willing to know what he wants to do. But late as he was, he comes to know his own will at last. That is, both Marcher and May can know the essential person for their lives after all. So my standpoint in this essay is that what James wants to express is not “unlived lives” but the characters’ process to “know” their wills.

Both in “The Beast in the Jungle” and in “The Bench of Desolation” (1910) which was published seven years after the former work, have a common theme of “fear” which the hero in each story always feels. While in “The Bench of Desolation” the hero is permitted to have the hope of creating a future with his important woman, Marcher, on the other hand, loses his lover forever even though he realizes who is indispensable for him. In “The Bench of Desolation”, James might set up the hope for future as a kind of salvation, which he fails to create in “The Beast in the Jungle”. Both in these two works, the object of a hero’s fear shifts from his uncontrollable happening to his own inner self. Marcher faces what he fears and lives the pain of life.

The aim of this essay is, through analyzing the change of metaphorical meanings of the “beast”, to consider what the “beast” is for Marcher at last.

I The “Beast” as an Uncontrollable Power or an Identity

Like a person who seeks a hold on an unseen map of a life to be relieved and

relies on a fortune teller, Marcher thinks of the “beast” as an occurrence to live for or as a kind of his identity though he knows it is a terrible happening. Indeed the “beast” is a very ambiguous idea at first, it has some effect to show Marcher’s way of thought to find his original meaning. Nicola Bradbury also writes about this effect as follows:

In his [James’s] novels the word is often ambiguous, suggesting a selfish motivation; but in a critical context its connotations are usually positive: it is the business of the novel to take hold of our attention and imagination, though it is ours to be aware of this, ‘unresistingly aware’, perhaps. (Bradbury, 5)

Here I would like to consider how the meaning of the “beast” as an uncontrollable destiny is formed for Marcher.

Marcher and May meet each other at Weatherend about ten years after their first meeting. Although they weren’t close friends at all in their past, they want to make the most of their meeting again. But just acquaintances as they are, they don’t have decisive memories to talk with. They have lived their lives too passively and safely to have exciting occurrences in their lives. What Marcher wishes to happen between them is as follows:

... he ought to have rendered her some service—saved her from a capsized streets of Naples, by a lazzarone with a stiletto. Or it would have been nice if he could have been taken with fever, alone, at his hotel, and she could have come to look after him, to write to his people, to drive him out in convalescence. (280)¹

What Marcher imagines is all troublesome occurrence for a peaceful life. Even though they were troublesome, he thinks it’s good for him and May to have such accidents rather than not to have one. Such his thought already reflects the theme of this story. If their past memory for each other were strong enough, they might resume their friendship by talking about it to construct their future relation because they are still young to be close to each other. However, they cannot have an origin to construct their future and have only “small possible germs, but too deeply ... to sprout after so many years.” (280) Both Marcher and May regret their passiveness in their younger days, so that they think they must not lose this chance in vain as follows: “They looked at each other as with the

feeling of an occasion missed" (279) As they have the same will not to lose this chance, they have every chance to be close friends or lovers at any time. Moreover, it is worthy of note that, as for the chance to love, they lost nothing and can marry whenever they want till May dies at last.

However, only because they lack close relationship in their past and common memories, they are inclined to give up constructing closer relationship as if they are obeying a kind of rule though they are charmed by each other. That is why May manages to remind the "secret" which he told her ten years ago and Marcher shows his interest in it so soon, as if both of them seek and find a rule to permit their new relation for future. In this sense, what is important is not the contents of his "secret" but their unconscious will to manage to construct a band between them. It is May, a female who never asked men to marry at that time, who "proposes" the topic of their common interest, while Marcher is a passive man. That is why they cannot make the best of their unconscious will to attract each other.

We can find Marcher is a passive man because he feels happy to find that his existence and his secret have been taken care of by someone. Different from a person who can construct his own identity with confidence even if he is lonely, Marcher is a kind of person who makes sure of his identity by others' recognition. He thinks that "somehow the whole question was a new luxury to him—that is, from the moment she was in possession. If she didn't take the ironic view she clearly took the sympathetic, and that was what he had had, in all the long time, from no one whomsoever," (282)² because he more lacks confidence and subjectivity rather than is starved for love. Like Dodd, the hero in "The Bench of Desolation", Marcher is very proud as well as is very passive. According to May, the secret of Marcher is "the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible." (282) Marcher himself tells his destiny as if he were a hero in a tragedy as follows:

. . . it isn't anything I'm to *do*, to achieve in the world, to be distinguished or admired for. I'm not such an ass *that*. It would be much better, no doubt, if I were. (283)

Northrop Frye says in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) that if a character has an ability more than ordinary people but is not endowed with a good environment he

makes himself a tragic hero. Marcher's foreboding about his destiny is not comic but tragic. That is, Marcher has blind and selfish pride in thinking that he excels the others. Jeremy Tambling also writes, "the secret is caused by his sense of difference from the world." (Tambling, 169) Although he is uneasy and always fears, he doesn't know the object of his fear. However, he is somehow sure of the nature of the happening he may face and says, "I think of it simply as the thing. The thing will of itself appear natural." (283-284) It can be said that the only confidence of Marcher lies in his conviction of knowing "the thing."

Moreover, Marcher's pride is an outburst of his inferiority complex because he cannot live an actual life to do something all by himself. Marcher's complex as such is a reflection of the author's real life. As for James's complex, Daniel J. Schneider writes: "His [James's] sense of incapacity to live life directly and passionately is so intense that almost any reference to 'brute quantity and number'—almost any reference, to military prowess, to adventure, to action and competence—arouses his envy." (Schneider, 20) Marcher's pride is described as a kind of sorrow not to have an adventurous life.

Then because he is sure of the happening so much, he does nothing in his life. Besides, he makes use of his destiny as an excuse for not being married to May. That is, he can evade his selfishness by thinking that he must not be accompanied by a woman to such a dangerous life with a "beast" and must not be married. In this way, he can associate with May without marrying her. Moreover, he idealizes his destiny and makes himself a hero as follows:

The definite point was the inevitable spring of the creature; and the definite lesson from that was that a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt. Such was the image under which he had ended by figuring his life. (287)

He gains a kind of autosuggestion that he is a brave man. For Marcher, "the beast in the jungle" heightens his impression as a tragic hero rather than as a passive man and removes his selfish impression.

Here we can find that he frequently talks his vast stock of knowledge about the "beast" but he never operates the destiny. Although he thinks the "beast" is a terrible destiny, he gets a guarantee in his life without doing something by himself because his destiny is uncontrollable and happens to him without fail. His

thought that his destiny is autonomous leads the personification of his destiny named the "beast" which exists outside human beings. As for the "otherness" of his destiny or of his "beast" he describes as follows:

It isn't a matter as to which I can *choose*, I can decide for a change. It isn't one as to which there *can* be a change. It's in the lap of the gods. One's in the hands of one's law—there one is. As to the form the law will take, the way it will operate, that's its own affair. (290)

His sense of destiny that it is uncontrollable and is not the thing he himself must create, originates from his indecisive mind and his weakness wanting to rely on something.

In this way, even if the "beast" were a terrible affair, it could give Marcher the reason to live for. The "beast" becomes his life itself as well as his identity. Ilana Bar'am also writes, "Marcher's sense of 'being kept for something rare and strange,' of being elevated above the commonplace, is what constitutes his identity." (Bar'am, 172) When he remembers the "beast" by May, he knows the pleasure of being recognized by the other person, gains confidence that he is a kind of heroic man who has a defined destiny and evades selfish impression even if he cannot marry May. Therefore, the "beast" is an indispensable existence in Marcher's life and is even a sacred element. For passive Marcher, the existence of the "beast" is thrilling enough, so that his fear for it is a kind of awe. Certainly both Marcher and May use the word "afraid" very frequently. For instance, we can find it in their conversations as such:

"Is it, possibly, that you've grown afraid?" (291)

"Afraid?" He thought. (291)

". . . you see I'm not afraid now." (291)

"Enough to make you feel, then—at what we may call the end of our watch—that I'm not afraid?" (292)

"You're not afraid." (292) [*Italics mine*]

Since the "beast" becomes sacred for Marcher, he doesn't fear it and is intoxicated with his destiny. Paradoxically, he gains self-consciousness to live for and peace of mind by being conscious of the terrible "beast" in his life. In other words, since the "beast" is an uncontrollable occurrence that happens without fail, he need not make effort to get it. When he realizes that the "beast" means

not an uncontrollable outside power but his inner nature, he is really afraid of what the "beast" means.

II The "Beast" as a Fear for Losing a Life

As for the relation between metaphor and human consciousness, it can be said that Aristotle took the lead of discussion. Marcel Danesi writes, "Aristotle noticed that metaphors revealed something fundamental about the human mind. But he did not pursue this line of thinking. He simply acknowledged that metaphorical language was psychologically powerful, but affirmed that it was, in essence, an ornamental or stylistic option to more basic literal ways of thinking and speaking." (Danesi, 122) The "beast" suggests Marcher's strong feeling by its image of an animal that is living unlike Marcher's calm way of life.

Marcher just keeps waiting a dramatic incidence and leads a passive life only by talking about the "beast" for him. Therefore, he must re-recognize the meaning of the "beast". When he thinks of the "beast" as an outside power away from him and just waits it, he has a kind of relief to secure his identity. Now he loses the relief and is uneasy about what his life is. He no longer ascribes his passiveness and his selfish friendship with May to the "beast" outside him. As one of the James's hero who likes to be an "observer," Marcher doesn't like to inspect his inner self or his responsibility. Now he must consider the causes of his passive life, which is lain in his own mind. We can read out how Marcher begins to be aware of the terrible element, the "beast," in his own self in the description as this: "Marcher had been visited by one of his occasional warnings against egotism." (292) To evade the sting of conscience for making use of May, he serves her to take her to operas as often as he can.

May, at the same time, refers to their unnatural relationship without marrying so long, so that Marcher begins to think about the meaning of their friendship again. As a result, what he fears is that he may lose May, an indispensable woman for his life and identity. That is, the "beast" means to lose May for Marcher. We can think out two reasons why he fears for losing her. As one reason, he fears not to be supported by someone who observes the future happening of him together and foretells it to him like a guide. His fear as such may

suggest childish selfishness like "Mother Complex" in his mind. Rather than fearing to lose May herself, he cannot bear facing the terrible event all by himself. Because he is accustomed to the life with May even if he is not married, his fear for losing her cannot but have a selfish tone. He is not used to be alone and does not have an independent way of life. Though he cannot live and face his destiny alone, he does not like to let others enter his life and keeps the position of an "observer." Being full of inconsistency, he tries to escape from solitude without having a close relationship with people.

However, at the same time, he also has a point of view from which he is purely worried about May and fears her death "for her." That is, May is also much interested in Marcher's "beast" and waits to lose her life as well as Marcher. As a special friend, Marcher sympathetically fears that May must die without seeing what she waits. It can be said that Marcher sees "his" own self or his possibility in May to feel he may end his life without seeing the "beast." When he worries about May he feels as follows:

She had been living to see what would be to *be* seen, and it would be cruel to her to have to give up before the accomplishment of the vision. (294)

Here we can see that the common points between Marcher and May have a certain effect to bring about what they need to know. It's not an important point that May seems to be a devoted woman nor that Marcher is a selfish man. The point at issue is that they resemble each other in their character. By seeing the tragic life of his own in another person, Marcher renews his sense of reality. He begins to think what kind of value and aim his real life has.

The only thing that "happened" in his life was the meeting with May after ten years silence and their keeping the same secret itself. Therefore, it can be said that their secret is Marcher's life itself and that the very possibility of losing May, the indispensable element in his secret, may be the biggest terrible happening in his life. He realizes that losing May is the "beast" for him as follows:

One of them was that he should have caught himself—for he *had* so done—*really* wondering if the great accident would take form now as nothing more than his being condemned to see this charming woman, this admirable friend, pass away from him. (295)

So the "beast" is not the thing that comes to him but the one that leaves from him.

He reaches another phase of the idea of the "beast." Marcher's fear for losing life without doing anything is brought out through his seeing May's life close to its end.

What did he learn from his foreboding that May loses her life? Until then, he has never thought of his life as a failure even if he just waits something. His confidence is described many times:

... his existence could only become the most grotesque of failures. He had been far from holding it a failure—long as he had waited for the appearance that was to make it a success. (295)

Now that he thinks about May's death, he begins to judge a life by using such dualism as success and failure, win and lose. His way of thought as such means that he begins to be aware of the decisive limit of a life imagined as closed time. His sense of the "time" becomes more sensitive, so that he thinks more and more about his age as well as May's. Indeed his self consciousness about the limit of a life gives him a pessimistic point of view, but at the same time it draws out his active power to do something by himself. That is, his sense of the time means his awakening to live a real life. For instance, Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903) tends to feel the time of his life as a kind of detached existence from him. So he does not "live" his time but observes his time. It is not until he enjoys his present time as his own that he decides to live his life actively to know whatever he can do regardless of its success or failure. Marcher is also aware of the limit of his life, so that he thinks of a life in which one cannot get what he really wants at last as a failure:

It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonoured, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything. (296)

Especially, the idea that he is "nothing" erases his identity and the evidence of his life and is more terrible for him than failure from some action. Now the "beast" for him is the possibility that nothing happens to him and he is nothing after all.

In this way, what the "beast" means for him is transfigured from the first meaning. The "beast" means not what comes to him but what leaves from him, not what happens to him but the fact that nothing happens to him. He has been waiting the "beast" and his waiting for nothing itself turns to be the "beast." Paradoxically, the "beast," to lose the time to live, is constructed with time.

That is, the "beast" is made from Marcher's way of life. Then what he must understand is how to evade losing his time. He says, "I'm only afraid of ignorance now—I'm not afraid of knowledge." (299) What Marcher fears most is his own immature insight. He is anxious to know what May knows and he does not know.

May knows what may happen to Marcher. Though Marcher wishes her to show it to him, May advises him that it already happened to him and that he need not know it. May seems to be sickened by the image of miserable Marcher who will be left alone to know the meaning of the "beast," the meaning of what he has lost, all by himself. However, it is May herself who constructs the final meaning of the "beast" and asks Marcher a riddle when she says the "beast" in his life has already "come." (303) So her advice not to search the meaning of the "beast" which she constructs, is itself paradoxically a direction to "search" the meaning. In this way, Marcher is to know the meaning of life not by experiencing a special event but by knowing what he has not done.

III The Meaning of What He Lost

After May's death, Marcher goes traveling to Asia and tries to gain worldly experiences. However, he feels the world as uneventful as his own life and returns home. Through this travel he turns his eyes toward his inner self instead of toward his outer causes. So his return to May's tomb means his return to his inner conflict. The middle-aged man whom Marcher meets at May's tomb has a look of distress. This man's look is described as follows:

Marcher felt him on the spot as one of the deeply stricken—a perception so sharp that nothing else in the picture lived for it, neither his dress, his age, nor his presumable character and class; nothing lived but the deep ravage of the features that he showed. (310)

Marcher knows what he lacks in his character, that is, the essential passion in the life even though it may also be anguish. The passion is just what the middle-aged man has and Marcher does have. It can be said that the man embodies what Marcher has been if he had passion. He plays the role of showing Marcher the passion Marcher should have. Marcher can see the difference of a woman's

destiny because the man and Marcher have the same situation at the cemetery:

He had seen *outside* of his life, not learned it within, the way a woman was mourned when she had been loved for herself; such was the force of his conviction of the meaning of the stranger's face, which still flared for him like a smoky torch. (311)

Marcher had no need to wait something and had every chance to love May.

Marcher was so fearful of hurting himself that he consciously keeps himself insensitive. Knowing the meaning of passion for his life, he comes to be aware of his essential sensibility. He finds that what ascertains one's identity is the passion to express one's frank desire. The point is that he didn't know what he wanted to do and whom he loved and who he was. So the "beast" is just an excuse for his not knowing how to fix his feeling. He fears his ignorance as the most terrible "beast" in his life.

His "lost" time is not a destiny but a result of his character; in the same way, the woman he must not lose is not an uncontrollable destiny but a constructed element which he himself feels indispensable to his life as the time goes. It is both Marcher and May who makes each other the person not to lose. Here, we can see the James's continuous theme that what we call the "destiny" is not a thing to be "there" without someone's handling but a thing "constructed" just by the person. If there is a destiny uncontrollable by a human being, it will be ascribed to the nature of the hero who will not act with passion but just waits.

May leads Marcher to find her as an indispensable woman. Indeed May is never a selfish person, however, as a result, she controls Marcher's life and is the cause of his last pain. At any rate, May is a savior for Marcher to dissolve the void of Marcher's life because Marcher already knows that the pain with passion is better than nothing. She asks Marcher not to search the meaning of the "beast," which she knows, after her death. But at the same time, she says Marcher who worries about where the "beast" is:

"However the case stands that isn't the truth. Whatever the reality, it is a reality. The door isn't shut. The door's open," (300)

"It's never too late." (300)

These May's words effectively brings out the meaning of what Marcher knows after May's death. Now that May died, Marcher cannot enjoy the life with May

any more even if he realizes he must not lose her. It's true that he loses her, but for all that what he realizes as his failure is meaningful.

Practically, May, as well as Marcher, loses her life just for waiting Marcher's change without realizing her one-sided love. Different from Marcher who finds his mistake by himself, May is noticed by Marcher as an important woman in his life. That is, the void of May's life is dissolved by Marcher to be a meaningful life. What Marcher understands as the void or as the failure of his life, itself is the starting point of his participation in "life". His feeling as such is described as follows: "That at least, belated and bitter, had something of the taste of life." (312) It can be said that substantial lives of Marcher and May exist outside this text. Jeremy Tambling also writes, "The tale ending with the view that nothing has happened to him suggests the futility of narrativising: if anything has happened, it is outside representation." (175) Even though May dies physically, she begins to "live" for Marcher at last.

Marcher's pain for knowing embodies the taste of life in James's works. Such James's continuous theme as losing life brings out his trust for life, in which nobody is too late to do something like May's words. In James's literature to know something, even if it was lost, is itself has a certain meaning. For instance, Roderick in *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and Milly in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) are not permitted to live in each end after the show of their existence. And still they have the power to control the lives of the people in this world. Marcher must also feel the attack of the "beast," which means May herself who makes her presence felt, after his losing May. Such his feeling is described as follows:

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, on his face, on the tomb. (312)

At last, the "beast" is the metaphor which means Marcher's awakening for life and moreover for pain in life. Marcher's fear for such "beast" speaks for how shocking his awakening is. He enters in the Jungle of his life, knowing what he needs to know with love and passion in the form of pain.

Alwyn Berland discusses about James's "renunciation" theme: "There is obvi-

ous drama, of course, in Jamesian renunciations. If it is not the kind that suits the popular taste for happy endings, neither is that the taste which James wished to recognize." (Berland, 56) As for the theme of renunciation, Marcher renounces his conscious will to avoid the pain of life. His "renunciation" makes him nearer to multiple meanings of life and insight.

Notes

- 1 Henry James, "The Beast in the Jungle" in *Tales of Henry James* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984) 280. All the quotation from the novel refer to this edition; hereafter, all page references will be noted in parentheses after the quotation.
- 2 Strether in *The Ambassadors* also feels his time as the thing "to be kept" or "kept for something". The characters' detachment from reality is often disguised as their pride to be some person.

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