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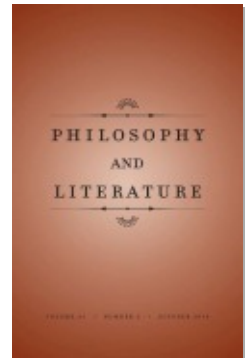
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BEASTLY VAGUENESS IN CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE AND HENRY JAMES

IN 1878, CHARLES SANDERS Peirce closed the first section of “How to Make our Ideas Clear”—an article that William James later declared a “birth certificate of Pragmatism”—on a strangely anecdotal note.¹ Using what would become known as the pragmatic method to demolish the notion of Grand Ideas (“Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects”), Peirce also included a lesson from an “old German story”:

Many a man has cherished for years some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake, and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become, as it were, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some morning to find it gone, cleaned vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it. I have myself known such a man. (*WCSP*, p. 261)

The story of the fled Melusina (a half-woman, half-serpent who gives birth to monsters) acts ostensibly as a warning against the danger inherent in “vague” ideas. “A vague shadow of an idea” can sap the life-blood out of a young man and, therefore, Peirce asserted, we must strive to be clear. But Peirce’s anecdote did more than further his argument; it was an autobiographical aside—so personal, in fact, that he ordered the passage to be deleted in all future printings of his essay.

Melusina was not just an allusion to a mythological figure; it was also a reference to the middle name of his wife, Harriet Melusina Fay. Since his schooldays, Peirce’s friend and, later, wife, whom he called

“Zina,” had been his constant companion and even the scribe for his fervent aspirations. Under the title “Theories of C. S. Peirce, 1854” she had transcribed his ambitious declaration: “My life is built upon a theory: and if this theory turns out false, my life will turn out a failure” (Brent, p. 51). By the mid 1870s, Peirce’s theory, “passionately loved . . . his companion by day and by night,” was finally being elucidated in his articles; however, Melusina herself had “cleaned vanished away,” after two decades of intimacy, leaving Peirce in Paris to what his friend Henry James described as “a very lonely and dreary existence.” Peirce’s inclusion of an anecdote about his own loneliness—“I have myself known such a man”—is poignant even as it reveals his anger. Melusina is both a monster and “beautiful,” and with her disappearance, Peirce has lost, “the essence of his life.” The personal allusion also highlights the anxiety in the young Peirce’s writing. What if his theories came to nothing, remained merely vague, and he lost his whole life and his wife to a misguided dedication? And how ironic would that be given that the idea itself aimed to explode the fallacy of grand ideas? Such an irony was not lost on his main companion during the winter of 1875, Henry James.

In the following pages I aim to demonstrate that Charles S. Peirce’s anxiety acted as a germ for the beast of John Marcher in James’s late story, “The Beast in the Jungle.” “More than any of Henry James’s tales,” Paul Lindholdt writes, “‘The Beast in the Jungle,’ has prompted source studies and psychoanalytic discussions by critics striving to identify” John Marcher.² Eager to diagnose the relationship between Marcher and May Bartram, critics have sought both autobiographical and literary sources for Marcher’s character.³ Strangely, however, no one has noted the connection between Peirce and Marcher, an omission that is especially odd given the critical attention directed at the relationship between the story and pragmatism. Since Richard Hocks’s *Henry James and Pragmatic Thought* highlighted the pragmatic tendencies of James’s story and called Marcher the “anti-pragmatist” hero, “an epitome of William’s philosophical opponents: a priori, monistic, intellectualist,”⁴ several studies, particularly Ross Posnock’s *The Trial of Curiosity* and Sharon Cameron’s *Thinking in Henry James* have sought to identify James’s philosophy in its relation to William’s and have often located “The Beast” as a fruitful source.⁵ William James himself has been pinpointed as a character source for Marcher, given the theory-driven nature of Henry’s anti-hero, but William, after all, had become a successful philosopher and professor whereas Peirce embodied the “failure” Marcher feared.

This essay will direct attention to Peirce rather than to William as a source for Marcher in order to emphasize two points. First, the connection between Marcher and Peirce sheds light on Marcher's final epiphany—still a focus of critical debate—undermining Marcher's certitude that he has finally understood the meaning of his "beast in the jungle." Second, in presenting a "great vagueness" that a character is thwarted in articulating, James denies Peirce's early maxim that "vagueness" is merely an excuse for inarticulacy (p. 762). For Henry James the vague was a potent force as he emphatically declared his "confidence in the positive saving virtue of vagueness."⁶ William James, reacting to a certain extent against Peirce's declaration that he had "worked out the logic of vagueness with something like completeness," argued for the "reinstatement of the vague" in *The Principles of Psychology*. Henry James, in a parallel gesture, reasserts the strength of "vagueness" through the victory of the beast in "The Beast in the Jungle."⁷ Indeed, Henry James was not alone amongst modern fiction writers in his embrace of linguistic and stylistic vagueness. The revolt against positivism in the philosophy of language ran parallel to the revolt against literary realism in the history of the novel. Henry James's "Beast in the Jungle" and the victory of the "great vagueness," I argue, is one important element of modern fiction's "reinstatement of the vague."⁸

Henry James had known Charles Peirce since youth, though always as William's friend. In *The Metaphysical Club* Louis Menand asserts the enormous influence that a group of young men including William James and Charles Peirce (as well as John Dewey and Oliver Wendell Holmes) who formed a club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1872 had on twentieth-century America: "Their ideas changed the way Americans thought—and continue to think—about education, democracy, liberty, justice and tolerance."⁹ Though Menand's claims are plausible, for Henry James, on the spot, these meetings seemed more amusing than history-making. He makes his opinion of their enterprise clearest in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton: "My brother, and various other long-headed youths have combined to form a metaphysical club, where they wrangle grimly and stick to the question. It gives me a headache merely to know of it."¹⁰ Henry's vision of Peirce as just another of William's "long-headed" friends, however, changed to a personal admiration when both young men found themselves in Paris three years later. Through this close friendship Henry James became acquainted with both Peirce's vaulting ambition and its darker side, his intense anxiety.

In James's 1881 journal, the "unspotted blank-book" started during

his return visit to Boston, he asserts, "I shall not attempt to write the history of that year"—the year 1875 at 29 Rue de Luxembourg. However, he recalls the most important personages from that winter in Paris, "a time by no means misspent," amongst them Peirce and Gustave Flaubert. James writes: "I saw a good deal of Charles Peirce that winter—as to whom his being a man of genius reconciled me to much that was intolerable in him."¹¹ In his letters to William he explains his friendship with Peirce: "We meet every two or three days to dine together; but tho' we get on very well, our sympathy is economical rather than intellectual" (*HJL* 2:13). Peirce spelled out their intellectual differences in his own letter to William: "[Henry] isn't as fond of turning over questions as I am but likes to settle them and have done with them. A manly trait, too, but not a philosophic one" (Brent, p. 104). However, their friendship overcame these differences, and their relationship that winter in Paris even led to William teasing Henry about their "intimacy" (*HJL* 2:32). William insisted that their mutual friends were agog at the news that Henry was "C. S. Peirce's particular admiration," and chided Henry for having, "fallen into the arms of C. S. Peirce, whom I imagine you find a rather uncomfortable bedfellow, thorny & spinous."¹²

While in his letters home to William, Henry James merely laments Peirce's lack of social skills, his response to Peirce's philosophizing—and particular philosophy—found an alternative outlet in his critical essay of that February, "The Minor French Novelists." Here, James famously censures Flaubert, calling reading *L'Education Sentimentale* "like masticating ashes and sawdust." Even those who praise Flaubert's writing, he asserts, admire it for being philosophical as "there is always an idea which holds them up and carries them along." James's criticism of the intellectual conviction underlying Flaubert's style—resulting in a "laborious monument to a treacherous ideal"—while ostensibly aimed solely at Flaubert, simultaneously smacks of an attack on Peirce and his as yet unnamed philosophy.¹³

Peirce's philosophical fruit of that winter of 1875 was the "Illustrations of the Logic of Science," which included both "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," the two articles which William James later repeatedly hailed as the ground-breaking works of Pragmatism. "Illustrations," according to Peirce's biographer, were conceived during 1875–1876 when Peirce was suddenly alone in Europe, and "suffering from periods of nervous collapse" (Brent, p. 13). Since Melusina had recently left Peirce, his philosophical idea had become his chief companion, so that James asserts, "I did what I could to give

him society" (*HJL* 2:32). Peirce intended, even more so with Melusina gone, "To make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind . . . shall appear as the filling up of its details."¹⁴ Peirce's drive to "outline" such a theory was his life-blood. Leon Edel notes that Peirce and James "helped each other through certain hours of loneliness" that winter. During the course of their discussions Peirce may well have shared his obsessive concern about his theory.¹⁵

In "The Fixation of Belief," the first paper in "Illustrations of the Logic of Science," Peirce regrets that "common sense, or thought as it first emerges above the level of the narrowly practical, is deeply imbued with that bad logical quality to which the epithet *metaphysical* is commonly applied," so he asserts, "nothing can clear it up but a severe course in logic" (*WCSP* 3:246). Therefore in his second paper, "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," he applies such a course, demonstrating that, "the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action," hence, "Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects" (*WCSP* 3:265–6). Transcendental truths, such as "Evil—with a very big E" as Fanny Assingham calls it in *The Golden Bowl*, have meaning purely in their effects.¹⁶ By the time he is called upon to write for the 1902 *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, he defines pragmatism as: "The opinion that metaphysics is to be largely cleared up by the application of the following maxim for attaining clearness of apprehension: 'Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.'"¹⁷ Later in his life, Peirce attempted to distance himself both from this assertion and from William James's pragmatism, as he wanted to clarify that pragmatism "was only a method; the truths which it sought to discover were absolute and eternal."¹⁸ However, even he acknowledged that his earlier work smacked of nominalism, which aims to undermine such "absolute and eternal" truths.¹⁹

At the same time that Peirce was formulating his ideas about pragmatism, Henry James was criticizing the "realism" of contemporary French novelists, writers like Flaubert who believe that "Human life . . . is before all things a spectacle, a thing to be looked at, seen, apprehended, enjoyed with the eyes" (*HJLC* 2:170). I have already cited James's response to *Sentimental Education*, but this was part of a more general attack on the version of clarity and the notation of detail favored by some realists. Just as Peirce's pragmatism asserts that metaphysics can be cleared up

by simply observing the effects, so also Flaubert's realism, according to James, reduces life to an observable phenomenon: "What our eyes show us is all that we are sure of; so with this we will, at any rate, begin . . . it is very possible that with this also we may end." James denies that through observation the novelist can capture the reality of "human life," and distances himself from a theory like Flaubert's in which, "We care only for what *is*—we know nothing about what ought to be" (*HJLC* 2:170).

James allows that writers like Flaubert: "admit nevertheless that there is something else, beneath and behind, that belongs to the realm of vagueness and uncertainty, and into this we must occasionally dip. . . . On the whole, we will leave it to take care of itself, and let it come off as it may" (*HJLC* 2:170). James's tone in this assertion, particularly given that his article culminates with the highest praise for George Sand who "has the true, the great imagination—the metaphysical imagination," seems highly ironic. For a great artist to squander his gifts on the "outside" of life, only to "admit" that there may be something greater than the squalid details of value in human life is for James the tragedy of French contemporary literature. James suggests that being relentlessly caught up in any kind of theory that espouses exactitude, as are Peirce and the "school of Flaubert," denies life its essential meaning.

James's choice of the term "the realm of vagueness and uncertainty" as a description of the ineffable, perhaps metaphysical, quality that "dead" novels like *L'Education Sentimentale* lack is pointed in terms of Peirce's pragmatism (*HJLC* 2:176). For Peirce in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" "vagueness" is an object fault, since "the very first lesson that we have a right to demand that logic shall teach us is, how to make our ideas clear" (*WCSP* 3:260). "Vagueness" for Peirce was a key concept. He argued that, "logicians have too much neglected the study of *vagueness*;" however, he had "worked out the logic of vagueness with something like completeness."²⁰ Under the heading "Vague" in *The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* Peirce writes:

A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or included by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequences of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habits of language were indeterminate; so that one day he would regard the proposition as excluding, another as admitting, those states of things. (*DPP* 2:748)

For Peirce, therefore, vagueness is due to an “indeterminate” habit of language, resulting from cloudy thinking, the failing of a thinker who did not bother to press himself with essential questions. There are merely “indeterminate” habits of language, rather than indeterminate “states of things,” so that a clear thinker, according to Peirce’s definition, would need to follow ruthlessly an exhaustive theory of language, similar to James’s description of Flaubert’s: “We believe there is a certain particular phrase, better than any other, for everything in the world, and the thoroughly accomplished writer ends by finding it” (*HJLC* 2:170). “Vagueness” and indeterminacy do not constitute a realm that allows for the “spiritual sense” of life, as James avers; rather, they are merely the result of flawed logical thought.²¹

After publishing his criticism of philosophical novels like Flaubert’s, James decided to leave Paris and with it Peirce and his grand ideas, and to set out to start life again in London.²² Peirce also left Paris suddenly in March of that year. Already crippled by anxiety, with James’s departure Peirce broke down: the first large manifestation of the mental illness that continued to plague him for the rest of his life.²³ Four years after “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” Peirce revised his description of the man who lived for a vague idea:

Suppose, for example, that I have an idea that interests me. It is my creation. It is my creature . . . it is a little person. I love it; and I will sink myself in perfecting it. It is not by dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing them and tending them as I would the flowers in my garden.²⁴

Melusina and her sudden disappearance have now vanished from Peirce’s story. Cherishing an idea, “my creation . . . my creature,” has become his entire fable—told by a narrator that sounds more like he belongs in one of Henry James’s tales than in a philosophical treatise. The earlier warning against obsessive dedication has mutated into a praise of fixation: “it is not by dealing out cold justice” that ideas flourish but by constantly “cherishing them and tending them.” Even so, Peirce’s suppressed anxiety leaks back into his anecdote through his chosen vocabulary. The result of love for an idea is failure: “I will sink myself in perfecting it.”

The first germ of the “The Beast in the Jungle,” makes it clear that Marcher’s character stemmed from an image of “disappointed ambition.” In his notebook in 1894, James ponders “the drama, the tragedy”

of disappointed ambition, and in particular examines the tragedy of the man of genius's failure, who even with "the ambition, the pride, the idea of greatness" yet loses it all, as well as the girl who "had believed in his genius and his future" (*HJNB*, pp. 83–84). As in Peirce's anecdote in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," the germ of Marcher forsakes "the confidante" of his theories and chooses, "the ambition, the pride, the passion, the idea of greatness" over a woman like Melusina, his original love. Moreover James did not have to look far to find such a "drama . . . of disappointed ambition," since to all but a discerning few, Peirce had become the very figure of failure that he had feared.

For many years William had confided to Henry his fear that Peirce would fail, even for all his genius. "The poor cuss sees no chance of getting a professorship anywhere," William sadly noted, calling it "a great pity."²⁵ William's choice to dedicate *The Will To Believe*, "To My Old Friend, Charles Sanders Peirce," and his continued insistence that it was Peirce who coined the "the thing and the word pragmatism" were obvious attempts to emphasize publicly Peirce's importance as a theorist.²⁶ All of William's efforts must have kept Peirce's situation—and the terrible fruition of his anxiety—in Henry's conscious thoughts.

In "The Beast in the Jungle," written while his brother was valiantly supporting their old friend, Henry James describes a man who, as in Peirce's lament, lives for "some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false," the idea that "something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible . . . was sooner or later to happen" (p. 744). At the same time that James was formulating "The Beast in the Jungle," he was yet again writing a critical essay on Flaubert, this time for an introduction to *Madame Bovary*.²⁷ From his correspondence with William, Henry could hear of Peirce's repeated setbacks and illnesses. In fact, when James was writing "The Beast" William's efforts to find Peirce some sort of financial support were reaching their climax.²⁸ Peirce's terrible self-fulfilling prophecy that he would "sink himself" in tending to the "little creature" that is his idea is re-enacted in Marcher's realization that devotion and attention to "the Beast" have made him "the man" to whom nothing is to happen.

Moreover, in "The Beast in the Jungle" Henry James creates a character who is thwarted in his quest to articulate his vague idea, what Marcher calls "the great vagueness" (p. 762). In contrast to a popular interpretation, wherein Marcher is "an ass" and "the palatable moral," of the story is if "only the hero had been less self-preoccupied, he would have responded to the love of this warm and selfless woman," James's story

presents a vaguer lesson with Peirce in mind.²⁹ Marcher's epiphany may be merely wishful thinking—"the great vagueness," in contrast to Peirce's definition, is not merely the result of unclear thought, but something that cannot be verbalized.

Marcher's culminating realization is that love for May Bartram would have allowed him "to baffle his doom" (p. 782). "The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived," James writes, and yet this understanding seems, in Marcher's own words, "an abject anticlimax" (pp. 782 and 761). From their very first interaction, May has posited to Marcher that this may be the lurking beast: "Isn't what you describe perhaps but the expectation—or at any rate the sense of danger, familiar to so many people—of falling in love?" However, they both resist such a trite solution, as May is willing to verbalize: "You want something all to yourself—something that nobody else knows or *has* known?" (p. 745). As Marcher and May wait, what they do together is an attempt to describe the lurking beast, "the catastrophe," the "long riddle," "the superstition," "the mysterious fate," "the secret," although they fail to come up with a single definition. May's offer of herself when she approaches him "all expectant," assuring him "It's never too late," may be her attempt to bridge "the unspoken" (p. 768). However, Marcher disappoints her by merely saying "Well, you don't say—?" (p. 769). Physical human contact does not fulfill the need Marcher has "to say" what the beast may be.

Ruth Yeazell in "The Imagination of Metaphor," emphasizes that Marcher is "a man obsessed with a metaphor" and notes this tendency of May and Marcher to make metaphor together, like Strether and Miss Barrace in *The Ambassadors* (Yeazell, p. 171). However, in her suggestion that "speaking in metaphors, like thinking in metaphors is a way at once of confronting and avoiding unpleasant facts" (Yeazell, p. 182), there is the assumption that the unpleasant fact of Marcher's fortune awaits him, if only he would recognize it. In my opinion, Marcher's "odd obsession" seems to resist even reification into an unpleasant fact. Rather than avoid the unpleasant topic, Marcher wants to do little other than to try to verbalize his theory. What frustrates Marcher is that he can't speak his doom: "doesn't the man of courage know what he's afraid of—or *not* afraid of? I don't know *that*, you see. I don't focus it. I can't name it" (p. 756). Merely bantering about with the metaphor of the beast does not satisfy him. When May tries to reassure him that his experience has come and that he has survived, he immediately asks if it was a "positive definite occurrence, with a name and a date?" but May merely leaves

him “too helplessly out at sea” by answering: “Positive. Definite. I don’t know about the ‘name’” (p. 771).

At the end, fearing that his life was “the most grotesque of failures” in facing his fellow mourner’s “deep ravage,” Marcher has an epiphany: “He had seen *outside* of his life, not learned it within the way a woman was mourned when she had been loved for herself” (p. 781). But is this equation of a life lived without love really the “measurement of the abyss” or really the “sounding” of the depths? Marcher asserts that, “The beast had lurked indeed, and the beast at its hour, had sprung; it had sprung in the twilight of the cold April” when he had refused May’s love (p. 782). Yet the metaphorical beast, animated in Marcher’s hallucination, still rises up “for the leap that was to settle him,” at the end of the story (p. 782). Marcher is not able to control his knowledge even at the end of the tale; rather, he still thinks in terms of his metaphor, as if his definition is somehow not satisfactory though he “tried to fix it and hold it” (p. 783). Marcher wants to taste life just as the fellow mourner does, asserting to himself, “This horror of waking—*this* was knowledge . . . he kept it there before him so that he might feel the pain” (pp. 782–83). Yet, by limiting Marcher’s realization to his own point of view, James heightens the pathos of Marcher’s situation by allowing for the possibility that he is merely deluding himself. Perhaps Marcher never succeeds in getting to the root of his sensation, and the beast still lacks definition even as Marcher flings himself down “on his face, on the tomb” (p. 783). In calling Marcher’s story a “great negative adventure” in his Preface, James allows for the possibility that Marcher either has an epiphany of the nothingness of his life, or has a negative or meaningless epiphany (*HJLC* 1:1251).

Peter Brooks, in “The Melodrama of Consciousness,” notes that “The Beast in the Jungle” mirrors works like Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* which are “audacious and desperate attempts to understand and to speak of a central ‘darkness’ that is finally inexpressible.”³⁰ In “The Beast in the Jungle” Marcher does crave to understand and to verbalize the “inexpressible,” the “lost stuff of consciousness,” which nonetheless necessarily eludes his grasp (p. 776). James’s story presents a parody of Peirce’s philosophy that everything meaningful can be expressed: the man obsessed with a theory, seeing that his time is running out for definition, forces an interpretation onto his “great vagueness,” and is then overwhelmed by the unsatisfied personification of the metaphor itself. Sadly, however, Marcher’s realization that his life meant nothing was paralleled

by Peirce's perception of his own failure. Late in life, having failed to complete his *Magnum Opus*, Peirce lamented that he was a "mere table of contents, so abstract, a very snarl of twine."³¹

Marcher's desire to name the beast works against James's declared "confidence in the positive saving virtue of vagueness." Throughout James's fiction, "vagueness" or the "vague" highlights the fact that characters are entering the metaphysical realm, where logical exegesis in the vein of Peirce's "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" or Flaubert's realism will not suffice.³² When James enters the mode of the ghost story he evokes impenetrable "vagueness." Spencer Brydon feels closest to the ghost of himself in "The Jolly Corner" at twilight:

Then he could, as it seemed to him, most intimately wander and wait, linger and listen, feel his fine attention, never in his life before so fine, on the pulse of the great vague place: he preferred the lampless hour and only wished he might have prolonged each day the deep crepuscular spell.³³

Similarly, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, James emphasizes Isabel's supernatural connection to Ralph Touchett by reiterating the word "vague":

She believed that as the night wore on she should hear a knock at the door. She heard no knock, but at the time the darkness began vaguely to grow grey she started up from her pillow as abruptly as if she had received a summons. It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there—a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room.³⁴

There is no clear explanation for Isabel's knowledge of Ralph's death; rather, she has an obscure intuition; they communicate with "utterances too vague for words" (*Portrait*, p. 204). The inexplicable evil of Gilbert Osmond, as well, is tied to his vagueness: he is "a vague, unexplained American" with "eyes at once vague and penetrating" (*Portrait*, p. 299, p. 280).

Reiteration of the word vague for James is not a mere stop-gap, rather it implies suggestiveness, unspecified and unspecifiable fruitfulness. He describes Isabel's unknown future with Gilbert as "a last vague space," which her imagination could not yet cross, and *The Portrait of a Lady* itself leaves Isabel's fate famously vague (*Portrait*, p. 363). James knew this was the "obvious criticism" to level against the novel, "that I have left her *en l'air*," but, he insisted, "The *whole* of anything is never told."³⁵ Throughout James's notebook entries his 'germs' for stories are always

“vague, nebulous, the mere hint of a hint” (*HJNB*, p. 112). Even as he chastises himself for his “too frequent vagueness of mind,” his stories, like the negative adventure of John Marcher’s life, grow out of the shadow of vagueness (*NB*, p. xii).

James’s style, particularly that of ‘the major phase,’ is often criticized for a parallel stylistic vagueness. William James, frustrated with *The Golden Bowl*, expresses the general theme:

I don’t enjoy the kind of “problem,” . . . and the method of narration by interminable elaboration of suggestive reference (I dont [*sic*] know what else to call it, but you know what I mean) . . . won’t you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in style? Publish it in my name, I will acknowledge it, and give you half the proceeds. (*SL*, p. 463)

John Marcher’s inability to express his sense of doom in any manner but repeated metaphor parallels Henry James’s own later style of “interminable elaboration of suggestive reference” that William James laments. A story with “absolute straightness in style” is what Marcher seeks in the explanation of the beast: “a positive definite occurrence, with a name and a date.” But for Henry James the “certain indirect and oblique” presentation is perhaps—“any superficial appearance notwithstanding”—the only way to probe “the great vagueness” (*HJLC* 2:1321). James allows his readers to color in the details, such as Osmond’s menace, for ourselves: as he states, “Make [the reader] *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications” (*HJLC* 2:1188). The kind of hallucinated animation of metaphor that John Marcher experiences at the end of “The Beast in the Jungle” parallels James’s desire for his ideal reader’s active experience, as he wrote his goal was to “reduce one’s reader . . . to such a state of hallucination by the images one has evoked as doesn’t permit him to rest till he has . . . set up some semblance of them in his own other medium, by his own other art” (*HJLC* 2:1326).

And even William James asserted, though posterity tends to ignore it in light of the accepted version of the James brothers’ intense sibling rivalry, that the later works, like “The Beast in the Jungle,” achieved a “paradoxical success in this unheard-of method” (*LWJ* 2:278). Perhaps this is because he, too, acknowledged the power of the inexpressible,

arguing for a “reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life” against the notion that, “vague impressions for something indefinable have no place in a rationalistic system.”³⁶ William James’s reinstatement of the vague stems from his pragmatism which, in turn, derives from Charles Peirce.³⁷ Richard Poirier asserts that, “Pragmatism, in [William] James’s version of it, is a philosophy that recommends ‘vagueness’ as a counteraction to the dogmatizing of existent truths and as the necessary condition for the exploratory search for new truths” (Poirier, pp. 41–42). Ironically, Peirce, who figured as the germ of the disappointed genius for Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle” and whose apparent nominalism Henry James decried in his criticism of Flaubert’s realism, forged the pragmatic theory which fostered William James’s reinstatement of the vague. Henry James’s praise of William’s pragmatism, therefore, applies to Charles Peirce as well. “I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have . . . unconsciously pragmatized,” Henry wrote in a letter to William, “You are immensely and universally *right*” (*SL*, p. 489). But in response to Peirce’s early desire, in articles like “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” to slay “vagueness” as one would shoot the beast in the jungle, James’s insistence upon the fecundity of the inexpressible depths of the psyche rings out against scientific precision: “No, no, no—I reach beyond the laboratory-brain.”³⁸

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1. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” *Popular Science Monthly* (January 1878), pp. 286–302. Reprinted in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, ed. Christian J. W. Kloesel, vol. 3 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 257–76; hereafter *WCSP*. “Birth Certificate,” in Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce, A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 138.
2. Paul J. Lindholdt, “Pragmatism and ‘The Beast in the Jungle,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* (Summer 1988), p. 275. Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” *Collected Stories (1892–1910)*, ed. John Bayley, vol. 2 (London: Everyman’s Library, 1999), p. 762. Further quotations from this story will be cited parenthetically in the text.
3. Recent studies have ranged from presenting Henry James himself as the source for John Marcher’s character—Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James* (London: Chatto

& Windus, 1998)—to William James (Lindholdt) to literary figures such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe. For discussion see Lindholdt, p. 275.

4. Richard A. Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatic Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), pp. 182–83.

5. See Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 76–82, and, for an excellent summary of works relating the James brothers, Hocks, “Recollecting and Reexamining William and Henry,” *The Henry James Review* 18 (1997): 280–87.

6. Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (New York: Criterion Books, 1956), p. 412.

7. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (vols. 1–6 edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 1931–1935; 7–8 by Arthur W. Burks, 1958), 5:505. Hereafter *CP*. William James, “The Stream of Thought” (1890) in *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), p. 254. While Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and William Joseph Gaven, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), have also noted William James’s “Reinstatement of the Vague,” neither have demonstrated Henry James’s similar preoccupation.

8. This essay is part of a larger project entitled, “Modernist Fiction and Vagueness,” which treats the intertwined history of the philosophy of language and the modern novel.

9. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. xi.

10. *Henry James Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974–1984), 1:273; hereafter *HJL*.

11. *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 216; hereafter *HJNB*.

12. *William and Henry James, Selected Letters*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), pp. 99–100; hereafter *SL*. See also Cheryl B. Torsney, “An Exchange of Gifts in *The American*,” in *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, ed. John R. Bradley (New York: Macmillan, 1999).

13. Henry James, “The Minor French Novelists,” *Galaxy* (February 1876) reprinted in *Henry James, Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel, 2 vols. (New York: Literary Classics, 1984), 2:176; hereafter *HJLC*.

14. Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle” (1887), quoted in Brent, p. 1.

15. Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), p. 233. Dana J. Ringuette in “The Self-Forming Subject: Henry James’s Pragmatic Revision,” *Mosaic* (Winter 1990), pp. 115–29, and David Liss in “The Fixation of Belief in ‘The Figure in the Carpet’: Henry James and Peircean Semiotics,” *HJ Review* 16 (Winter 1995): 36–47, similarly argue for Henry James’s knowledge of Peirce’s theories.

16. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, Penguin Classics edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 310.
17. *The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. James Mark Baldwin, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1902), p. 321; hereafter *DPP*.
18. Therefore Peirce coined his term "pragmaticism," a word "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers," *CP* 5:414. See Bertrand Russell's Foreword to James Feibleman, *An Introduction to Peirce's Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), pp. xv–xvi.
19. Peirce later asserted of "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" that its "principal positive error is its nominalism," Brent, p. 326.
20. *CP* 5:505. Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith and other theorists of "Vagueness," still turn to Peirce as their founder: *Vagueness, A Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 14.
21. It is important to note that Peirce's philosophy changed after this period. "Since logic lies at the very heart of his system and logic was a changing subject to him, changes in his logic had an immediate impact on his philosophical system," Cornelis de Waal, *On Peirce* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2001), p. 5.
22. Sheldon Novick, *Henry James: The Young Master* (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 316–49.
23. For the most recent discussion of Peirce's illness, adultery, and subsequent disastrous career see Menand, pp. 159–62, pp. 274–83.
24. Peirce, "Evolutionary Love," *The Monist* 3 (1893), p. 178, reprinted in *CP* 6:289.
25. (24 Jan. 1869.) *The Letters of William James*, edited by his son Henry James, 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 1:149; hereafter *LWJ*.
26. William James, *The Will To Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), and *William James: Selected Unpublished Correspondence 1885–1910*, ed. Frederick W. Down Scott (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), p. 256.
27. A further germ of "The Beast in the Jungle" appears in his notebook of 27 August 1901 (*HJNB*, p. 199); by 1902 James had published the critical introduction to *Madame Bovary*; in 1903 he published "The Beast in the Jungle."
28. See *William James, Selected Unpublished Correspondence (1885–1910)*, pp. 287–305.
29. Guert Buelens, "In Possession of a Secret: Rhythms of Mastery and Surrender in 'The Beast in the Jungle,'" *The Henry James Review* 19 (1998): 17. The initial critical consensus that May is a selfless victim to Marcher's blind egotism (though still a force in potent arguments such as those of Yeazell and Sedgwick) has moved to the far opposite extreme and reads May herself as the vampire of Marcher's life but seems to find balance in Buelens's assertion that though such "moralizing" readings provide a pleasing "allegorical simplicity," the relationship between Marcher and May is less easily diagrammed, and instead through their "twin desire for mastery and surrender," we see "a particularly poignant illustration of the interpersonal and rhythmical constitution of identity in James" (Buelens, pp. 18–31). See also Herbert Perluck, "The Dramatics of the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in James's 'The Beast in the Jungle,'" *The Henry James Review* 12 (1991): 246; Ruth Yeazell, "The Imagination of Metaphor," and Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet" in *Henry James, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ruth Yeazell (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1994), pp. 154–89; and Leda Montgomery, "The Lady is the Tiger," in "*The Finer Thread, The Tighter Weave*," ed. Joseph Dewey and Brooke Horvath (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2001), pp. 139–48.

30. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 175–76. See for discussion, James Guetti, *The Limits of Metaphor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

31. Milton R. Konvitz and Gail Kennedy, *The American Pragmatists* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1967), p. 79. Though, of course, the current flourish of interest in Peirce in a variety of disciplines, "logic, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, semiotics, computer science, literary criticism, film studies," suggests Peirce avoided Marcher's fate after all. See *The Rule of Reason*, ed. Jacqueline Brunning and Paul Forster (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 3.

32. In *The American*, James's arguably most melodramatic novel, he uses the word vague forty-five times. See David Higdon and Todd Bender, *A Concordance to Henry James's The American* (New York: Garland, 1985). This number only seems to grow with later works, vague appears over fifty times in *The Ambassadors*, sixty times in *The Portrait* and over seventy in *The Golden Bowl*, according to my own admittedly rough count.

33. James, "The Jolly Corner," *Collected Stories 1892–1910*, p. 957.

34. James, *The Portrait of A Lady*, ed. Geoffrey Moore (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 624; hereafter *Portrait*.

35. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, eds., *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 18; hereafter *NB*.

36. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 73.

37. The difference between Peirce's pragmatism and James's stumps most everyone except Peirce. For example, see Richard Rorty, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "Peirce protested against James's appropriation of his ideas, for complex reasons to do with his obscure and idiosyncratic doctrine of 'Scotistic realism'." See for discussion de Waal, p. 4.

38. Henry James, "Is There Life After Death?" *In After Days* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), p. 233.