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# Henry James, Impressionism, and Publicity

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In two essays that frame his career as a published novelist, Henry James moved from sardonic derision to celebration of French impressionist painting. In August 1876, James slated Georges Durand-Ruel's second official impressionist exhibition in the *Salon des Refusés* for "abjur[ing] virtue altogether, and declar[ing] that a subject which has been crudely chosen shall be loosely treated" (*PE* 115). Twenty-nine years later, in the essay, "New England: An Autumn Impression," later published in *The American Scene*, he offered an about-face, praising "wondrous examples of Manet, of Degas, of Claude Monet, of Whistler" (*AS* 45-46) for offering the "momentary effect of a large slippery sweet inserted, without a warning, between the compressed lips of half-conscious inanity" (*AS* 46). James' change, as a number of critics have suggested, probably owes something to his growing sense of a shared aesthetic enterprise, a joint investment in the "impression" as a critical, creative moment; in "The Art of Fiction," first published in 1884, James famously declares that a "novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life" (*AF* 507).<sup>1</sup> Yet when James' responses to impressionist paintings are read in the context of their publication history, these essays also reveal his sense of how experiments in both pictorial and novelistic art were being forced to negotiate increasingly complex and conflicted forms of circulation in a publicity-conscious marketplace.

The curtailing of James' brief unsuccessful stint as a foreign correspondent in Paris for the New York *Tribune* in August 1876 no doubt informed his initial disapproval of the Durand-Ruel exhibition's controversial and highly publicized paintings. As he broke from the *Tribune*, decrying its demands for a more "'newsy' and 'gossipy'" style (*LC* II.64), James also shrank from impressionist Paris' "tolerably unprofitable spectacle" of artists and critics embroiled in "mutual feuds and imprecations and heart-burnings" (*PE* 90-91). If the impressionism of this exhibition represented, for James, an unhealthy product of spectacular promotion, his belated discovery of "wondrous examples" (*AS* 45) in a private collection in Farmington offered, in contrast, a sheltered refuge from the cultural monotony he attributed to American publicity.<sup>2</sup> James' publication of this excerpt from his American travelogue in the *North American Review*, a publication he had previously critiqued for its scant appreciation

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of literature and its tendency to deal “wholly with subjects political, commercial, economical, scientific” (*LC* I.684), suggests his new admiration for impressionist art involved a reappraisal of, and identification with, its earlier embroilment in a culture of publicity. While James, in a notebook entry from 1887, would announce his horror at the “invasion” of “the devouring *publicity* of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private” (*NB* 40), his engagement with impressionist art, in criticism and fiction, involves a doubled vision of publicity as both a threat to the artist and an opportunity for the gathering of productive impressions.

Against this background, I wish to draw attention to an overlooked yet fascinating feature of James’ fiction: his repeated thematic pairing of impressionist art and publicity. In “The Art of Fiction,” James announces that “the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist” is “complete” and claims these figures “may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other” (504). At various stages in James’ career, the impressionist artist, as a character in his fiction, appears to offer an “analogy” that might “explain and sustain” his literary project. Three texts are pivotal to this argument: the two tales, “A New England Winter” (1884) and “Flickerbridge” (1902), and, between these, the much-neglected novel, *The Reverberator* (1888). The two tales register James’ initial distrust of visual impressionism as an aesthetic pose, his eventual attraction to the figurative potential of the American expatriate impressionist as an interstitial private-public figure, and his complicated alignment with the impressionist artist as a bastion of privacy, a professed enemy of publicity. Placing *The Reverberator* between “A New England Winter” and “Flickerbridge” offers a vital window onto James’ conflicted affiliation with the impressionist movement in painting and his growing awareness of his inevitable embroilment in late nineteenth-century publicity. If, as Jesse Matz has recently argued, literary impressionism can be understood as a movement intensely focused on the impression’s “mediation of opposite perceptual moments” (1), Jamesian impressionism in these texts is best understood as a vexed response to incremental mediatization, as a conflicted “mediation” of the public and the private. In “A New England Winter,” first published in *Century Magazine* in 1884, Florimond Daintry returns from a circle of impressionist artists in Paris to his childhood home in Boston where his mother plots and unplots to retain his company by introducing him to an intriguing young woman, Rachel Torrance. In light of his hostile reaction to the Durand-Ruel exhibit, it is perhaps unsurprising that when James first turned here to the impressionist artist as a figure for his own fiction, he approached it as a subject for satire. Florimond Daintry’s “impressionist” persuasion gives itself away by his reputation in Paris for seeking out “the visual impression”:

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His power of rendering was questioned, his execution had been called pretentious and feeble; but a conviction had somehow been diffused that he saw things with extraordinary intensity. No one could tell better than he what to paint, and what not to paint, even though his interpretation were sometimes rather too sketchy. (CS III.88-89)

As in James' early review of the Durand-Ruel exhibition, impressionism is here marked out by an obscure attention to "what to paint" (the subject "crudely chosen") and a "sketchy" interpretation (the painting "loosely treated"). Through the ironic observations and barely constrained irritation of Florimond's aunt, Miss Daintry, James' tale offers a somewhat sardonic account of the artist and his "unlimited interest in his own sensations":

In pursuance of his character as an impressionist, he gave her a great many impressions; but it seemed to her that as he talked, he simply exposed himself—exposed his egotism, his little pretensions. (CS III.93)

James plays with the artist's over-liberal employment of the term "impression," turning his self-pronounced intense impressionability on its head: Miss Daintry ponders setting Florimond up with the attractive mysterious Rachel Torrance in the hope that she will bring him down as "a presumptuous little boy," thinking to herself that "since it was his business to render impressions, he might see what he could do with that of having been jilted" (CS III.97). To be an impressionist, in "A New England Winter," is to be a pretender, an actor *doing* impressions of taste.<sup>3</sup> It is also to be "exposed" by this very act of self-publicity.<sup>4</sup>

This sending up of Florimond's and, by extension, impressionist art's pretensions works hand in hand in this tale with descriptions of the impressionist artist's attraction to an American culture of publicity. On his strolls down Beacon Street, Florimond is, thus, drawn to the "cheerful" and "commodious" intimacy suggested by houses' "large clear windows" which give "the street the appearance of an enormous corridor, in which the public and the private were familiar and intermingled" (CS III.90). Similarly, on Washington Street, he finds "material for the naturalist" (CS III.111) in "the details of American publicity," the "expressively commercial" housefronts, their "staring signs, with labels and pictures, with advertisements, familiar, colloquial, vulgar," the "stamp of the latest modern ugliness" (CS III.112). Florimond's "researches" into "optical impressions" draw him to the "familiar and intermingled" state of "the public and the private" in America, a description that looks forward to James' deriding of the "extinction of all sense between public and private" (NB 82) in his later notebook entries for *The Reverberator*. James' instinctive distaste for such subjects is mockingly present when Florimond comforts himself in the Boston

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winter with the thought that that “it was a fortunate thing the impressionist was not exclusively preoccupied with the beautiful” (*CS* III.111).<sup>5</sup>

“Flickerbridge,” published eighteen years later in *Scribner’s Magazine*, signals a significant shift in James’ approach to visual impressionism as an analogy for the place of his own aesthetic in a consumerist culture of exposure. The tale follows the American expatriate, impressionist portraitist, Flank Granger, as he visits Miss Wenham, a long lost English cousin of his (potential) fiancée, Addie. Granger becomes enamoured with Miss Wenham’s secluded residence, Flickerbridge, and seeks to prevent Addie, a “fitful” correspondent for a “prominent Boston paper” and other “public sheets,” from visiting and exposing it, eventually quitting the house when her visit can be no longer postponed (*CS* V.422). In some senses, the story retains an image of the impressionist art movement’s complicity with publicity, its alienation from valued privacy. The original notebook entry for the tale, in fact, designated Flank Granger’s character as “a young barrister—young journalist” (*NB* 286). The finished story retains this seminal link between artist and publicist in the relationship between Granger and the popular journalist, Addie, “the young woman to whom it was publicly both affirmed and denied that he was engaged” (*CS* V.421). This somewhat ambiguous engagement of Granger and Addie bespeaks James’ increasingly complex awareness of the ties that both affirm and deny his own impressionist aesthetic’s involvement in public journalistic culture. On arrival in England, Granger finds that his “first general impression” (*CS* V.426) of Flickerbridge “demand[s] verily all his faculties of response,” as the scene is both “so little to be preconceived in the sharp north light of the newest impressionism, and yet so recognised, after all, really, in the event, so noted and tasted and assimilated” (*CS* V.427). His impressionist vision has left him, then, both prepared and *unprepared* for the quaint seclusion of Miss Wenham’s house. James’ tale turns on this central tension between Granger’s artistic outlook wedded to publicity, alien to privacy, *and* his keen impressionability, his openness to the secluded charm “so noted and tasted and assimilated.” Whereas Florimond’s attraction to publicity struck the note for satire in James’ earlier tale, Granger’s ties to a culture of exposure speak to James’ more complex awareness of art’s inevitable entanglement in journalistic, consumerist, and promotional fields of discourse.

On the surface, the narrative of “Flickerbridge” might seem to suggest an easy equation between Granger and James as plain enemies of publicity both seeking a return to an idealized originary space. Flickerbridge represents, to Granger, an “untouched, untouchable, indescribable” (*CS* V.429) realm of innocence; it offers him “one of the sweetest, fairest, coolest impressions of his life—one, moreover, visibly, from the start, complete and homogeneous” (*CS* V.427). Against this, Granger

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sets before Miss Wenham an image of her dispersal through, and consumption by, Addie's press: in "an age of prodigious machinery," Addie represents "a publicity as ferocious as the appetite of a cannibal" (CS V.439). But Granger's "ferocious" image of the age—a description that echoes James' own railing against "the devouring *publicity* of life" in his notebook entry for *The Reverberator*—conceals his own cannibalistic desire to consume Flickerbridge (NB 82). Faced with this possibility of Miss Wenham's exposure, Granger ponders the artistic solution of "keeping the treasure for himself": "That was the art of life—what the real artist would consistently do. He would close the door on his impression, treat it as a private museum" (CS V.434). Granger's desire to privately hoard the impression is, James' tale suggests, not so different from the publicist's desire to expose: Addie's "sense" of Flickerbridge would be, Granger recognises, "exactly like his own, and he could see, in anticipation, just the terms of recognition and rapture in which she would abound" (CS V.430). The "real artist" shares with the "prodigious machinery" of publicity a hunger for possession.

Falling between "A New England Winter" and "Flickerbridge," *The Reverberator* revolves around a conflict between European (or Europeanized) prizing of privacy and American indifference to exposure. In it James reworks an anecdote he first made note of in 1887 about May Marcy McClellan, an American woman, who at the end of a summer spent in an exclusive Venetian salon went on to expose that clique's private conversations in an American paper. The anecdote demonstrates, James claims in his notebooks, "the extinction of all sense between public and private" (NB 82). But the "couple of columns in the vulgar newspaper" also, as James recounts in his 1908 Preface to the New York Edition of the novel, came to offer, "after several years of oblivion," "the very largest fund of impressions" (LC II.1197). The parallel, established in the Preface, between the work of the "graceful amateur journalist" (LC II.1196), gathering her "treasure of impressions; her harvest" in Venetian society, and that of James, "the weird harvester" (LC II.1202), reaping a "fund of impressions" of McClellan and her Americanness, in fact expands on the novel's ambivalent recognition of ground shared by the journalist and the artist. In a letter to Katherine de Kay Bronson concerning the McClellan episode, James expressed his desire "to write a story about the business" and then immediately withdrew that wish: "but I won't, to deepen the complication" (LC III.160). James did, of course, "deepen the complication" and, consequently, *The Reverberator* both traces and represses his fundamental aesthetic interest in the act of exposure.

Set in Paris (rather than the Venice of the McClellan anecdote), *The Reverberator* centers on the complicated engagement of Francie Dosson, an innocent American girl reminiscent of Daisy Miller, to Gaston Probert, a devoted seeker of "impressions

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of the eyes" (I.83) and the sole remaining French-born son of an aristocratically Gallicized, expatriate American family. Francie travels to Europe with her domineering sister, Delia, and her passive father, Whitney. At the novel's outset, she is the subject of a fellow American journalist's attentions—George Flack, a correspondent for the burgeoning newspaper, *The Reverberator*. Flack inadvertently introduces Francie to Gaston when he encourages her to sit for a portrait by the American expatriate impressionist, Charles Waterlow. The crisis of the novel comes when Flack, claiming the American public's interest in Francie's "impressions" (II.38), encourages her to reveal potentially scandalous familial details about the Proberts. His subsequent publication of these details, for which Francie is castigated by the Proberts, documents the rise of the "new" journalism in the late nineteenth century, with its increasing use of the interview as a means of exposure. The crisis is resolved when Gaston, acting on advice from Waterlow, breaks free from his family's scandalized outrage and rejoins the Dossons as they leave Paris in search of somewhere beyond publicity's reach. This brief synopsis highlights James' pivotal handling of a troubled and troubling relationship between impressionism and "new" journalism, between the connoisseur's desire for intense impressions and the publicist's quest to expose the private.

James' dual treatment of Gaston Probert, the impressionist spectator and Charles Waterlow, the impressionist painter, represents a complicated transition between his satirical and more sympathetic accounts of the impressionist in "A New England Winter" and "Flickerbridge." Gaston, with his "education" in Parisian impressionist language, finds himself, like Florimond Daintry, drawn to the fruits of American publicity, the innocence of Francie Dosson. Waterlow, whose art is, like Granger's, enmeshed in the promotional forces of a publicizing culture, offers a more measured, somewhat ironic take on his "*malheureux*" friend's enslavement to "impressions of the eyes" (I.83). James' representation of this pairing is, however, also more complicated. Both Waterlow and Gaston voice their opposition to and resentment of George Flack and the invasive journalism that he represents. But Waterlow and Gaston, in their approaches to Francie and her "charm of line," also offer approaches to the subject that in many ways mirror the impositions on, and dispersals of, others in Flack's popular writing. Through this complicated double-bind between impressionism and journalism, James ambivalently queries the nature of his own texts' engagement with cultures of publicity. Published in the same year that James would revise and re-issue "The Art of Fiction" in *Partial Portraits*, returning once more to that essay's theorizing of the novel as "impression," *The Reverberator* plays out a keenly reflexive argument for, and critique of, the impressionist as a public figure.

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Charles Waterlow and Gaston Probert share a distaste for the newspaperism of George Flack that would appear to identify them with James' sense of an "invasion." From the point of Charles Waterlow's first physical appearance in the novel, James sets the artist up in antagonistic opposition to the journalist. In the description of Francie's first appearance in his studio and of the "impression" she makes as an "adorable model" for both Waterlow and Gaston, the narrator, in a subordinate clause, refers to her escort, the reporter "whom [Waterlow] didn't like and who had already come too often to his studio to pick up 'glimpses' (the painter wondered how in the world he had picked *her* up)" (I.65). Gaston is similarly unimpressed when he joins Flack and the Dossons for dinner: he finds that he hates Flack's "accent, he hate[s] his laugh, and he hate[s] above all the lamblike way their companions accepted him" (I.90). Ironically, Waterlow's antipathy sets the scene for Francie's exposure of Gaston's family. Flack, seeking a first-hand view of the Proberts and their society, proclaims his "sensitive" awareness of the artist's dislike of "newspapermen" (II.45) as a reason for Francie escorting him to his studio, the fateful visit after which Francie informally reveals the Proberts' intimate details. And further to this, Gaston's openness to impressions is paralleled by George Flack's own journalistic enquiries in his efforts to convince Francie to expose the Proberts:

Ain't we interested in the development of our friends—in their impressions, their transformations, their adventures? Especially a person like me, who has got to know life—who has got to know the world. (II.40)

Flack's appeal for "genuine first-hand information, straight from the tap" (II.41) both parodies James' vision, in the revised 1888 version of "The Art of Fiction," of the novelist "receiving straight impressions" (*PP* 399) and invites unsettling parallels. Thus, while a "sensitive" openness to impressions is set up as a state antithetical to the presence of journalism, James' narrative frequently turns on revelations of impressionism's contribution to scenes of exposure, its enmeshment in Flack's publicity.

Waterlow's art is, in fact, first mentioned in terms of its commercial viability and its agent of publicity is none other than the "new journalist" himself, George Flack.<sup>6</sup> It is, as I have already mentioned, through Flack that Francie and Delia are first introduced to Waterlow—as Francie acknowledges in response to the journalist's request, "if it hadn't been" for Flack's involvement she would "never would have sat to him" (II.45). Moreover, the journalist's first mention of the opportunity presented by the artist immediately aligns the impressionist movement with the commercialization and technological development underpinning his own paper's success:

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Mr. Flack explained to them that it would be idiotic to miss such an opportunity to get something at once precious and cheap; for it was well known that Impressionism was going to be the art of the future, and Charles Waterlow was a rising Impressionist. It was a new system altogether and the latest improvement in art. They didn't want to go back, they wanted to go forward, and he would give them an article that would fetch five times the money in a couple of years. (I.62)

The prior inscription of Waterlow's art in a teleological narrative of journalistic discovery and progress speaks to James' anxieties about the changing face of an increasingly commodifying literary marketplace. But Flack's attraction to and promotion of Waterlow's art also motion toward more subtle links between the work of the journalist and the impressionist spectatorial stance of Gaston. Flack represents a fairly obvious embodiment of the invasive journalistic threats James had repeatedly parodied through such characters as Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady* or, more satirically, Matthias Pardon in *The Bostonians*. Where *The Reverberator* raises more pressing concerns for James, less containable through parody, is in its attention to parallels between Flack's promotional co-opting of Waterlow's art and Gaston's manipulative deployment of Waterlow's portrait of Francie as a sanitized introduction of the potentially offensive American girl to his family.

Having fallen for Francie's charm, Gaston plans a gradual revelation beginning with his sister Susan (also known as Suzanne) de Brécourt, "the most modern, the most Parisian and inflammable member of the family" (I.135-36). Susan is "as fond of beauty and of the arts" as Gaston, "this was one of their bonds of union." As Gaston explains to Waterlow, he intends to first reveal Francie through the charm of her portrait before introducing her in person. Susan "appreciate[s] highly Charles Waterlow's art" (I.136), and Gaston's plan hinges on her familiarity with the new school of criticism and her receptiveness to his "careful rhapsodies" concerning "the dazzling example of Waterlow's powers" (I.137). As a "disinterested lover of charming impressions," Susan is to act as a "wedge" in Gaston's efforts "to break in the others" (I.135), a "wedge" crucially built on her openness to publicity. Even if she passes "in her family for a rank radical, a bold Bohemian," she, in fact, "pick[s] her expressions out of newspapers" (I.140).

In his insightful reading of the novel's complicated and conflicting responses to a high-low culture divide, Thomas Strychacz argues that *The Reverberator* evokes a notion of the literary outside the text. Beyond the ignorant, unreading Dossons, the self-consuming language of the Proberts, and George Flack's "pretensions to literary stardom," the "literary" is revealed through the unreadable and yet "already read" absence of George Flack's article which occasions the novel's climactic action and "promises to document, once and for all, the literary transgressions of the new

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journalism" (56).<sup>7</sup> What Strychacz fails to note, however, is that the absent article forms, in James' text, a crucial parallel with the absent presence of Francie Dosson's portrait.

Like Flack's article, Waterlow's painting is only known to the reader of James' text by the public responses it evokes. From the perspective of the "new critics," Gaston and Susan, Francie's portrait is praised in terms of "the point of the view of the plastic, with a hundred technical and critical terms" (I.142). For the traditional Proberts, Waterlow's work plays questionable games with social positioning and representational taste. Gaston's sister, Margaret, claims "it might be a masterpiece of tone but didn't make [Francie] look like a lady" (II.56). His father, for whom the "novelty of Charles Waterlow's game had already been a mystification" (II.57), is bemused by certain "eccentric" spots on the portrait, and does not find it "well painted" (II.56). And, for Delia Dosson and Francie herself, the portrait offers "a large scope to their faculty for endless repetition, for monotonous insistence, for vague and aimless discussion" (I.156); it becomes the site for a mass production of meaningless talk reflecting the depersonalized, mass publication of culture they pursue through the newspapers.

While, on the surface, these exchanges appear to establish Susan and her brother, Gaston, as members of a new educated audience for impressionist art in competition with an "old-fashioned," academic appreciation of class and beauty, the novel undermines the cultured authority of the "new" critic by drawing attention to the "mania for publicity" that drives Gaston's appreciation of Waterlow's impressions. In short, Gaston's "mysteries and machinations" (I.133)—as Waterlow terms them—concerning the gradual revelation of Francie's identity through her portrait are nothing short of a publicity campaign worthy of the novel's more infamous journalist. Gaston "flacks" Francie's portrait with the hope of gaining her acceptance among his relations. Moreover, Gaston's attraction to Francie and the art of Waterlow is related in terms that directly link his critical stance with the "fresh" activity of the "new" journalist. Gaston, we are informed at his first appearance, is "in search of freshness" (I.73), and his search leads him to infatuation with Francie's American aloofness from the customs of Paris: "Freshness was there at least, if he had only had the method" (I.75).<sup>8</sup> In parallel with Gaston's appropriation of Francie's freshness, George Flack, we are informed in *his* first appearance, is "quite enthusiastic about Paris" because it is "ever fresh" (I.6). Ironically, when Flack eventually captures the freshness of Francie in the article that makes public her impressions of the Proberts' society, the Dossons are not shocked because "the newspapers and all they contained were a part of the general fatality of things, of the recurrent freshness of the universe" (II.123).

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If *The Reverberator* appears, then, to move forward through a series of ironic links between Gaston, the impressionist spectator, and Flack, the invasive reporter, how does James position his own “impressionist” writing in such conflicted public space? The reappearance of Charles Waterlow in the novel’s conclusion offers, I think, some clues. In the final chapter, Gaston invites himself into Waterlow’s studio seeking advice on the predicament he finds himself in with regard to Francie and his family. The impressionist painter urges his friend to marry her out of “self-preservation,” to “rescue from destruction” his “last remnant” of independence before his family renders him “incapable of individual life” (II.197). On the surface, Waterlow at first appears to espouse a marriage in which Gaston should independently come to recognise Francie for who she is rather than what his family want her to be: when Gaston challenges the painter, asking if he too would have “guaranteed” (II.195) her delicacy, to his family, Waterlow claims he would have thought her perfectly capable of indiscretion and “shouldn’t have cared” (II.196). But, in fact Waterlow’s advice centers on a notion of Francie’s “plasticity,” on the potential for moulding her lack of delicacy, and of the opportunity she poses for Gaston’s “moral independence” as a “real young Anglo-Saxon” (II.191):

Don’t you see that she’s really of the softest finest material that breathes, that she’s a perfect flower of plasticity, that everything you may have an apprehension about will drop away from her like the dead leaves from a rose and that you may make of her any perfect and enchanting thing you yourself have the wit to conceive? (II.199)

Just as James in “The Art of Fiction” also seeks to remake his audience by defining the borders of “taste” by circumscribing the freedom of the impression, so too Waterlow’s advice to Gaston concerning the acceptance of Francie and the Dossons is modelled on a reshaping of them as appropriate readers.

The impressionist painter’s role in the denouement of James’ novel in fact rewrites his initial intentions, in which it is George Flack, the journalist, who by threatening to publish their treatment of Francie ensures the Proberts’ reconciliation and secures Gaston’s and Francie’s marriage: “The newspaper dictates and triumphs—which is a reflection of actual fact” (NB 84). While the change in plans signals the impressionist artist’s expanded role in James’ finished novel, it also suggests links between the two endings: while it is not the newspaper that “dictates and triumphs” in the final version of the novel, the “triumph” of Waterlow’s impressionism still reflects, in the responses of Gaston, the prominence of a system of publicity. Flack’s attempts to manipulate Francie depend upon a sense of the Dossons’ family unit as feminized and, therefore, impressionable. When he seeks to counter Gaston’s rivalry for Francie’s

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hand, he looks to expose Gaston's unwillingness to introduce her to his female relatives, foreseeing "the effect with which he should impress it upon Francie and Delia (but above all upon Delia, who would then herself impress it upon Francie), that it would be time for their French friend to talk when he had brought his mother round" (I.91). In the final scene of the novel, Gaston returns to Francie informing her that has "given up" his family and that he wishes to leave with her and her family to "some place where there are no newspapers" (II.203). But, just at the point when Gaston might seem to be taking up Waterlow's coercively impressionist plan for masculine action, James' novel ironically suggests that Gaston's plans, his denial and evasion of the newspaper, in fact belie his continuing reliance on a vision of Francie, not unlike Flack's, as impressionable to publicity.

Gaston, in returning to Francie as the active artist, insistently seeks to deny the presence of publicity both in his past and in his future. His desire to find "some place where there are no newspapers" (II.203) is echoed in his response to Francie when she again informs him that her revelations to Flack were "for you—only for you, as I told you": he replies, somewhat curtly, "Yes, don't tell me again—I don't like that explanation!" (II.205). But when he admits to Mr. Dosson that his actions have cost him the financial support of his own father, James' narrative ironically undercuts Gaston's creative engagement with the Dossons in a series of subtle juxtapositions of dialogue:

"Well, that makes me feel better," said Mr. Dosson.  
"There'll be enough for all; especially if we economise in newspapers"—Delia declared, jocosely.  
"Well, I don't know, after all—the *Reverberator* came for nothing," her father went on, in the same spirit.  
"Don't you be afraid he'll ever send it now!" cried the girl.  
"I'm very sorry—because they were all lovely," Francie said to Gaston, with sad eyes.  
"Let us wait to say that till they come back to us," he answered somewhat sententiously. He really cared little at this moment whether his relatives were lovely or not. (II.205-206)

Two conversations are juxtaposed in these lines: the joking financial discussion between Whitney and Delia, and Francie's "carrying on" from her previous comments on her regret for Gaston's loss of family support. The move from Delia's comment on the free issues of the *Reverberator* that Flack used to send them to Francie's abstract nod to Gaston's family who were "all lovely" raises the momentarily disorienting possibility that Francie's "all" refers to the copies of the newspaper and not the Proberts. While Gaston's reply suggests that he senses the effects of his publicity

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campaign on his parents may still produce a future acceptance, the flitting reminder of Francie's inability to understand the vulgarity of Flack's article reinforces the idea that Francie's impressionability, on which Gaston's return depends, rests on her openness to publicity, her amenity to the newspaper.

Gaston's uneasy engagement to Francie—initiated by a journalist's promotion of an artist and carried forward by publicising “machinations”—foreshadows, then, the ambiguous union of Granger and Addie in “Flickerbridge.” Strychacz argues that *The Reverberator* appeals to an “interpretive community” convinced of the unliterary nature of Flack's absent article. Through the parallel treatment of Francie's unseen portrait, I contend that James, in fact, emphasizes the inter-reliance of impressionism and publicity, of high and low, of “literature” and more populist print mediums. *The Reverberator* dramatizes the diverse public reception James expects from a publicity-satiated culture. As a “fresh” form of fiction, James' impressionism is necessarily tied to the “new” forms of journalism and the publicity by which it circulates.

If *The Reverberator* represents a crucial moment of transition in James' reading of impressionist art as an “analogy” that might “explain and sustain” his own art's conflicted investment in the publicity-inflected domain of the literary marketplace, to what are we to ascribe this change in his outlook? I have already suggested that James' early distaste for the artistic movement was tied up in his burgeoning sense of a critical divide between his writing and the journalistic publicity that greeted the impressionists' rise. In keeping with this, James' shift in appraisal in *The Reverberator* can be traced to two key moments in his concurrent writing. First, this period marked a low point, for James, in his popular reception. In a letter to William Dean Howells in January 1888, he lamented that the relative commercial failures of *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* had “reduced the desire and demand, for [his] productions to zero” (L III.209). In the weeks preceding his return to publication in the first issue of *The Reverberator*, James found himself faced (by no means for the last time in his career) with a pressing sense of the need for a delicate balance between critical rigor and popular appeal. James' analogical turning to impressionist art was, thus, informed, I suggest, by his professional involvement, only months prior to this expression of frustration, in the promotion of a fellow expatriate American's “impressionist” art, that of John Singer Sargent. When James reflexively looks to the art of Charles Waterlow, “formed for” Gaston's “affection by Monsieur Carolus” (I.73), he has in mind the work of Sargent, mentored by Carolus Duran, on whose œuvre he had recently penned an affectionate article—or, less kindly, a publicity-piece or “flack”—in *Harper's Magazine*.

In the 1887 article on Sargent, James admits the attraction of seeking to “render an impression of an object” but claims the success of such an approach is dependent

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upon “what...the impression may have been.” He joins other critics in suspecting some impressionist artists of “seeking the solution of their problem,” the communication of the impression, “exclusively in simplification.” The problem, for James, with “simplification” is rendered as a conflict between artist and public:

If a painter works for other eyes as well as his own he courts a certain danger in this direction—that of being arrested by the cry of the spectator: ‘Ah! but excuse me; I myself take more impressions than that.’ We feel a synthesis not to be an injustice only when it is rich.

In this context, James finds Sargent’s simplification to be carried out with “style,” making “his impression in most cases...magnificent” (JSS 684). Sargent’s complex impressions, then, placate the cry of the impressionable spectator. Nevertheless, James sets his personal appreciation of Sargent’s oeuvre against the general public’s resistance. He highlights Sargent’s independence, his willingness to run “risks little courted by the votaries of the literal, who never expose their necks to escape from the common” (JSS 689). Sargent’s “language of painting” is, according to James, a medium “into which a considerable part of the public, for the simple and excellent reason that they don’t understand it, will doubtless always be reluctant and unable to follow him” (JSS 686). But despite the “unreasoned scandal” at his *Madame Gautreau* in 1884 and the “prodigies of purblind criticism” brought out by *The Misses Vickers* in 1886, James suggests Sargent’s paintings perform a “genuine service” reminding “people that the faculty of taking a fresh, direct, independent, unborrowed impression is not lost” (JSS 691)—a phrase prefiguring James’ revised vision of the novel, in the 1888 edition of “The Art of Fiction,” as “a personal, a direct impression of life” (PP 384). In James’ opinion, Sargent, at his best, engages a diverse viewing audience, as in his 1881 piece *Lady with the Rose (Miss Charlotte Louise Burckhardt)*, where James finds the artist “arous[ing] in the even the profane spectator something of the painter’s sense, the joy of engaging also, by sympathy, in the solution of the artistic problem” (JSS 685).

James’ account of the general public’s resistance to Sargent’s art and of the educative force of Sargent’s impressions clearly aligns the American artist’s work with the novelist’s vision of his own art as a neglected but potentially public-forming medium in the nearly contemporary, “The Art of Fiction.” In *The Reverberator*, Charles Waterlow as a representative of Sargent’s American impressionism, as a relatively neglected artist-figure, and as the subject of Flack’s, and new journalism’s, invasive publicity machine, plays out James’ anxieties about an aesthetic form that seeks to “render an impression of an object” and that, like Sargent’s art, makes itself the target for “prodigies of purblind criticism.” On the other hand, Gaston Probert’s

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voyeuristic enchantment with “impressions of the eyes” (I.83) and his publicity-inflected campaign for his family’s acceptance of Francie speaks to an awareness of the journalist’s and the impressionist’s mutual participation in exploitative handling of their subject matter. James looks to a literary impression that might mediate between private vision and public reception but his writing ambivalently acknowledges how such aesthetic strategizing finds a parallel in the much-maligned world of publicity.

Ironically, *The Reverberator* concludes with Gaston and the Dossons leaving in search of his envisaged, elusive unpublicized space, “even yet not at all clear as to where they were going” (II.207). At the text’s borders, Gaston, as Waterlow cryptically forewarns earlier, is “lost.” Gaston’s fate and Waterlow’s warning suggest James’ growing sense of the need for the literary impressionist to go beyond “impressions of the eyes” (I.83), to acknowledge art’s ties to publicity, its inevitable investment in exposure and “the extinction of all sense between public and private.” At the same time, James’ novel registers a desire to contain the (feminine) reading publics courted by such a coalescing of art and publicity. Offstage and yet crucial to the novel’s final moments, Charles Waterlow, with his resentment of Flack’s invasions but acceptance of American indiscretion, with his mixture of French experimentation and American independence, represents the absent presence of James in his own text, impressing his vision on the American girl even as he proposes a model of the novel as impressionable and permeable, contested yet free. Waterlow, like Sargent, speaks for James’ sense that “the faculty of taking a fresh, direct, independent, unborrowed impression is not lost,” even if that “fresh” impression reflects a world immersed in publicity. \*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the most convincing recent reading of James as a literary impressionist see Jesse Matz’s *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (85-120). Matz’s model of reading literary impressionism through attention to the author’s use of the term “impression” represents a more dynamic and specific opening to identifying James’ work as impressionist than other works that have sought to use this generic classification to embrace the solely pictorial and perspectival elements of James’ writing (for examples of this latter approach see Kirschke and Hoople). Charles R. Anderson offers a convincing reading of James as a literary impressionist with links to the French schools of thought by foregrounding his debt to, and admiration of, Pierre Loti, Alphonse Daudet, and Guy Maupassant, all of whom James praises for their impressionist attention to appearance and perception (277-283).

<sup>2</sup>The collection is housed at the colonial revival-style manor, Hill-Stead, a museum since 1947, which was designed by self-taught architect Theodate Pope Riddle as a country estate for her parents, Alfred and Ada Pope in 1901.

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<sup>3</sup>The notion of “doing impressions” (impersonations) does not, in fact, arise until the 1960s in America, but James can, at least, be seen here to be playing on the sense of impressions as tenuous, dubious moments of experience—as in the phrase “under the impression.”

<sup>4</sup>Donald Stone describes Florimond as “a broadly comic version of James’s Pateresque side: an impressionist with ‘a great deal of eye,’ an egoist with the tiniest of backbones” (239). Pater’s mantra, from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, that the artist must seek “to know one’s impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” is certainly a key moment in the genealogy of James’ own literary impressionism (see Matz 53-78). However, Stone’s reading of “A New England Winter” as Paterian satire overlooks the specifically painterly form of impressionism, rather than aestheticism, being critiqued. Adeline Tintner finds hints of the American impressionist, John Singer Sargent in Florimond Daintry’s character, but there seems little reason to link the lampooned artist of James’ tale with Sargent, whose work James, in 1884, claimed to “admire exceedingly” (92). As the conclusion to this article shows, Sargent, as an example of an American balancing the demands of popular publicity and independent artistry, seems, as Tintner admits, a more important model for the character of Charles Waterlow in *The Reverberator*.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Buitenhuis offers an alternative reading of James’ deployment of the impressionist painter in “A New England Winter,” arguing that the story “indicates a major change in his technique” (133), an “attempt to make a series of impressionist verbal paintings of Boston after the manner of Daudet” (136-137). For Buitenhuis, Florimond’s attention to the features of urban Boston signals James’ own interest in abandoning “European forms and Ruskinian ideals of beauty” and pursuing “a more scientific representation of experience” (139). While Buitenhuis’ reading may point to correspondences between the artistic practices of James and Florimond, it fails to highlight the distinct unease behind such identifications, the satirical tone that foregrounds James’ early objections to impressionist attentions to publicity and the erosion of clear public boundaries.

<sup>6</sup>Intriguingly, in America, the word “flack”—originally possessing various physical meanings (slap, blow, stroke, flap, or rake)—has come, as a verb, to signify the act of publicizing a novel, a movie or, even potentially, a painting. Correspondingly, “flack” as a noun can be used to refer to a press or publicity agent, someone who “flacks.” As the *OED* gives examples of usage of the verb only from 1966 and of the noun from 1946 and claims the origin of both terms is unknown, it is difficult to comment on whether the title of James’ character may have informed or been informed by these meanings. In an explanation that retains the word’s originally violent connotations, the *Dictionary of American Slang* suggests the word may have been a figurative respelling of “flak,” slang for fragments from artillery shells coined during World War II (Wentworth and Flexner 187).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Salmon, in the only other notable recent criticism of *The Reverberator*, argues that the novel nostalgically nods to a “vestigial” past of conversational expertise as its ideal public, placing it on a theoretical level, alongside Jürgen Habermas’ and Richard Sennett’s more recent promotions of the French salons and English coffee-houses as “paradigmatic communicative space” (136-137). Neither Salmon nor Strychacz address the crucial role of Waterlow’s impressionism in marking out the public space of art and its reception in the novel.

<sup>8</sup>As if to underscore this link between the impressionist and new journalist, James, in his revisions for the New York Edition, alters his description of Waterlow, who if he “had a fault it was that he was sometimes a little stale” (1.66), to if he “had a fault it was that his freshnesses

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were sometimes too crude” (RNY 41). “Crude” is the same word that Gaston seizes on his dismissal of Flack in the New York Edition: he “did indeed hate his crude accent and vulgar laugh” (RNY 49).

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