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Richard Salmon

Excerpt

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Introduction

In an important sense, all literary texts, like all acts of criticism, are, by definition, public events. The very fact that we invariably speak of the relationship between a writer and his or her ‘public’ implies an understanding of the function of literary discourse which is irreducible to our simultaneous recognition of the particularity of such publics. If publics are, in fact, necessarily finite entities, the possibility of an infinite elasticity is always inscribed within the notion of ‘public’ circulation.¹ Since the eighteenth century, at any rate, the status of the literary text (like that of other forms of print culture) has become contingent upon its function as a commodity, capable of being disseminated throughout the various institutional and informal media of critical debate which together constitute what Jürgen Habermas has termed a ‘literary public sphere’. This is true even – and perhaps especially – of those generic forms which most appear to resist or refuse the transitivity of public communication. Autobiographies or letters, for instance, are capable of attaining recognition as ‘literature’ only if their resistance to publicity is signalled publicly. By negotiating a passage between private and public domains, the ostensibly ‘private’ text draws attention to the very boundaries from which its public function emerges.²

From around the end of the nineteenth century, however, this Enlightenment conception of the normative function of public discourse has also co-existed with a very different understanding of the term ‘publicity’. In this other, and recognizably modern, sense of the word, publicity has often been thought to mark a dissolution of the existing boundaries between private and public space, rather than simply negotiating a passage between them. Instead of occupying one side of an opposition which it otherwise preserves, modern publicity may be said to reconfigure the geography of cultural space in its entirety. In this sense, publicity may also be

viewed as a symptomatic phenomenon of modern culture: one which is linked inextricably to the historical formation of mass culture and the mass media. While this historical process need not be taken to represent a catastrophic fall of 'public culture', as some critics have alleged,³ it does, nevertheless, mark a significant shift in the public life of authors and texts. The modern writer, no less than the modern text, enters into a sphere of public circulation, and the condition of publicity alters the constitutive forms and functions of literary communication. In the process, this condition has helped to shape our own distinctively modern cultural landscape.

In the following study, my aim is to examine this cultural landscape at the turbulent moment of its formation, and to do so through a reading of the work of Henry James. Throughout his career, I argue, James was concerned with the modern phenomenon of 'publicity'. From his early book reviews of the 1860s and 1870s to his fiction and cultural criticism of the early twentieth century, references to this term recur with a remarkable frequency. The word itself appears to have borne a peculiarly intense and evocative meaning for James: although it is used to designate a wide range of cultural forms, practices and assumptions, it also seems to accrue a meaning that is singular and overbearing. With an alarming regularity, it often seems, James found the same phenomenon in very different, and sometimes unlikely, places. At the risk of schematizing such diversity of reference, however, it is possible to distinguish between three, overlapping moments in James's engagement with this phenomenon. From his earliest writings onwards, James revealed an acute concern with the cultural space of authorship, and its movement across a shifting boundary between private and public spheres. His reviews of such figures as Hawthorne, Flaubert and George Sand are full of rebukes directed towards the 'invasion of privacy' practised by biographers, journalists and the publishers of authors' private manuscripts, and these concerns were also translated into numerous, admonitory stories such as 'The Aspern Papers', 'Sir Dominick Ferrand', and 'The Real Right Thing'. With some notable exceptions, these commentaries are often sternly didactic, and might appear to represent James's cultural criticism in its most 'Victorian' guise.

During the 1880s, however, James also became aware of more organized and pervasive forms of publicity. In such novels as *The Bostonians* and *The Reverberator*, James engaged directly with the

historical formation and subsequent expansion of the mass media which took place during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and thus fulfilled the naturalistic agenda of 'sketch[ing] one's age' which he outlined in a notebook entry recorded in 1887 (*NB* 82). It was during this period, in fact, that James's critique of the 'invasion, the impudence and shamelessness, of the newspaper and the interviewer, the *devouring* publicity of life' was most explicitly and intentionally elaborated (*NB* 82). The principle of publicity, exemplified by such cultural forms as advertising and the New Journalism, was installed at the centre of modern cultural experience. In the following decade, James's career bifurcates into the apparently antithetical pursuits of popular theatrical success and an elite readership for his tales of the 'literary life'. Yet in both ventures, he was forced to confront the publicity of modern culture in equally explicit ways. The status of the 'artist' in an increasingly commodified literary culture mirrors James's personal experience of the public stage, and augments his concern with the attenuation of authorial privacy.

By the time of the so-called 'major phase', however, this programmatic engagement with publicity appears to have diminished. Conventionally, it has been argued that James's later fiction marks a retreat into the private, aesthetic world which he had so often defended in the past, and that the manifestly public concerns of his earlier, realist novels were, accordingly, abandoned.⁴ In itself, this assertion is something of an oxymoron, since, for James, there is no more public concern than his concern with 'privacy'. Moreover, as a growing number of critics have begun to suggest, James's apparent withdrawal may only conceal, or indeed constitute, a deeper and more immanent form of engagement.⁵ In his later fiction, I will argue, James devised new strategies of representation in order to confront an increasingly diffuse and anonymous mass media, which threatened to render his earlier censure of biographers and journalists anachronistic. In *The Ambassadors*, for instance, his treatment of the 'art of advertisement' could scarcely be described as thematic, as it is in *The Bostonians*, but the 'revelation' of its presence resonates throughout the text (*A* 341). Here, the practice of publicity is no longer confined to a readily identifiable agency, but instead saturates both the novel's representation of urban spectacle and its own formal modes of construction. If, in some ways, *The American Scene* marks a return to a more explicit mode of cultural analysis, it also

continues this 'conception of publicity *as* the vital medium' of modern social exchange (*AS* 75). James's vision of the American 'hotel-spirit' instantiates publicity as a cultural condition, or form of consciousness, rather than as a purely external or mechanical force (*AS* 73).

This preliminary sketch of James's unfolding response to the modern phenomenon of publicity will give some indication of the scope of the following enquiry. While this study is both generally and specifically historical in approach, however, it does not undertake to pursue a strictly chronological reading of James's career. What is offered, rather, is a series of overlapping historical narratives which correspond, in large measure, to the narratives which James himself inscribed both within and between many of his texts. In chapters 1 and 2, for example, I begin by exploring the politics of James's response to changing conceptions of the literary public sphere and of 'the public' itself; in chapters 3 and 4, I examine the conflict between James's defence of the value of (authorial) privacy and the emergence of 'investigative' discourse in the fields of biography and journalism; and, finally, in chapter 5, I consider the development of James's later style of cultural criticism in relation to the spectacular form of modern culture. Each of these chapters represents an attempt to relocate James's writings within cultural and discursive contexts which have, to varying degrees, been neglected. While James himself is central to this enquiry, it has also been my aim to situate his texts within a much wider network of contemporaneous cultural debate than is commonly the practice. It is only by recognizing the extent of James's immersion within these debates that it becomes possible to understand the complexity of his own particular critical stance.

This, of course, is by no means an attempt to suggest that all critics have hitherto avoided the task of reading James historically. On the contrary, over the course of the past decade or so, studies by Marcia Jacobson, Anne T. Margolis and Michael Anesko have all attempted to situate James's fictional practice within the context of an expanding literary market, and have thus challenged the received myth of his self-imposed artistic isolation.⁶ As a result, our understanding of James's antipathy towards the 'commercialization' of late-nineteenth-century culture has been tempered by a recognition of his own strategic exploitation of the changing relations between authors, publishers and readers. Yet the fact that James inevitably participated in the culture which he so persistently rebuked does not

necessarily mean that the value of his protest is there by diminished. One of the assumptions behind this recent body of criticism is that James's rhetorical opposition to the market simply conceals the truth of his own accommodation to it. Where this study differs, however, is in its attempt to preserve the critical character of James's response to the formation of mass culture. By entirely collapsing James's distance from the mass market, we run the risk of effacing the very sign by which the historicity of his texts may be recognized. James's cultivated aloofness from the 'vulgarity' of the literary market-place is in itself testimony to the cultural schism which, as many critics have shown, took place towards the end of the nineteenth century. As Fredric Jameson has argued, the formation of a separate entity known as 'mass culture' belongs to a wider historical process in which, simultaneously, the category of 'high culture' was generated as its mutually defining other.⁷ In order to grasp the truth of this cultural schism it is necessary not only to recognize the complicity of its polarities, but also, as Theodor Adorno often insisted, their antinomy.⁸ By fulfilling this dual imperative, it becomes possible to preserve both James's antagonistic relationship to mass culture and his accommodation to it. In other words, James's (apparent) distance from the arena of mass culture becomes the sign which allows us to recognize his proximity to it.

This critical strategy is, in fact, closer to the approach of a somewhat different body of recent Jamesian criticism, one which has been concerned, primarily, with examining the effects of 'commodity culture' on James's fiction. In his important essay 'The Consuming Vision of Henry James', Jean-Christophe Agnew, for example, has argued that James's 'celebrated posture of detachment . . . may have had as much to do, in the end, with the emotional and intellectual proximity he once felt to a burgeoning mass-market society as with the distance he eventually adopted'. James's withdrawal from this society coincided with an internalization of the visual and cognitive codes of consumption, which is manifested in the characteristic form of his fiction. At the same time, Agnew also recognizes James's powerful critique of the acquisitive ideology of consumerism: a critique which gains value precisely because it comes 'from within rather than from without' its object. For the purposes of this study, however, James's critique of commodity culture is not entirely equivalent to his response to the phenomenon of publicity. In Agnew's definition, James's apprehension of the 'publicity' of

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modern culture refers generally ‘to the values and instrumentalities of a market society: the traffic in commodities, the habit of display, the inclination to theatricality, the worship of novelty and quantity’.⁹ This definition aptly identifies the pervasive and informal practices of cultural representation which characterize what Guy Debord, commenting upon their later twentieth-century development, termed a ‘society of the spectacle’.¹⁰ Yet it also overlooks more formal or institutionalized media of publicity, such as the press, with which James was equally concerned. In the case of journalism, the practice of publicity must be understood not simply as a ‘habit of display’ or as an object of consumption, but also as its discursive ethos – as the very rationale of its social function. Likewise, James’s abiding interest in the status of the writer dramatizes the conflict between publicity in its modern forms and a public sphere which is dependent upon the simultaneous preservation of authorial privacy. The point of these distinctions is to suggest that while James may certainly be read as one of the earliest and most prescient analysts of commodity culture, his analysis is also rooted within an existing lineage of cultural and political thought, from which the term ‘publicity’ emerges as a peculiarly contested site. In order to understand James’s concern with publicity, it is important to bear in mind the cultural shift which this term was undergoing during the course of his career.

The significance of this cultural shift has, indeed, been a subject of recent debate in the field of social theory, much of it deriving from the work of Jürgen Habermas.¹¹ In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in 1962, Habermas charts the formation and subsequent erosion of a bourgeois conception of publicity which formed one of the central pillars of Enlightenment thought. The ‘bourgeois public sphere’, in this account, emerged as a site of opposition to the absolutist power of the monarchy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In order to counter the coercive exercise of public authority, alternative channels of public discourse were forged between private individuals. For Habermas, it is precisely this separation between private and public interests within the bourgeois public sphere which allowed it to assume a genuinely critical function *vis-à-vis* the public authority of the state. If, on the one hand, the autonomy of the (male) individual was grounded within an economy of private commodity exchange, on the other hand, the sphere of public debate suspended, at least in

principle, the private interests of the individuals from which it was composed. Thus the public interest was not simply defined by the quantitative aggregation of its allied or competing private interests; rather, its legitimacy rested upon a normative conception of the 'disinterested' character of public debate. Indeed, the very function of the bourgeois public sphere was to bring to light the 'secrets of state': to expose the private interests concealed behind the mask of public authority.¹²

It was during the latter half of the nineteenth century, according to Habermas, that this ideal of 'critical publicity' was challenged by a form of 'manipulative publicity' which accompanied the rise of the mass media. For Habermas, this transformation was the result of a logic that was immanent to the social structure of the bourgeois public sphere. On the one hand, the expansion of the market economy undermined the separation of private and public interests, out of which it had previously emerged as an autonomous field of social activity. On the other hand, the extension of the political franchise served only to increase the visibility of conflicts which could no longer be accommodated into the supposition of a unitary public interest, even though this process was grounded upon the supposition itself. It is the attempt to negotiate these conflicts of private interest privately, Habermas argues, which leads to a 'refeudalization' of the modern public sphere: in both economic and political domains, the boundaries which had served to demarcate civil society from the state begin to collapse. Whereas, previously, publicity had functioned as a principle of critical public scrutiny, it is now returned to something which approaches its pre-capitalist function as an asymmetrical form of social display. In the modern sense of the word, publicity is represented before a public, rather than being constituted by it: while its political legitimacy remains dependent upon the value of democratic 'openness', its own practice systematically contradicts this value since it is the product of a prior arrangement. Habermas's argument is thus more complex than the common (and usually conservative) complaint that publicity simply erodes the privacy of the bourgeois subject. While this effect is not without importance, it is also accompanied by the recognition that 'manipulative publicity' is itself the product of a 'secret politics'.¹³

Habermas's account of the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere is, of course, open to question on a number of grounds, some

of which I will have reason to explore during the course of this study. For our present purposes, however, what is useful about this account is the way in which it allows James's analysis of the 'pathologies' of modern culture to be brought into a sharper historical and conceptual focus. James's cultural criticism may, indeed, be read as a prolonged experiential articulation of the historical process which Habermas externally and retrospectively reconstructs. Like Habermas, for instance, James linked the 'devouring publicity' of modern life to 'the extinction of all sense between public and private' wrought by the 'democratization of the world' (*NB* 82). In various guises, it was this dissolution of boundaries between public and private space which he found everywhere encoded within the landscape of modern culture. James's insistence upon the necessity of maintaining these boundaries would thus appear to place him within the tradition of liberal, Enlightenment thought which insisted upon a similar separation of powers between society and state. During the nineteenth century, it was this tradition which nurtured the response of a number of prominent cultural critics to the burgeoning presence of 'mass society'. Perhaps the earliest exemplar of this liberal critique of mass culture was the French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville, whose observations of American culture and society in the 1830s and 1840s incorporated an equally anxious recognition of the ways in which the process of 'democratization' was leading to a reconfiguration of the normative boundaries between private and public spheres. In the two volumes of his *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), de Tocqueville had argued that the prestige attached to 'common opinion' in American society eroded the autonomy of 'private judgement', and thus collapsed the necessary lines of demarcation between the authority of the state, on the one hand, and a critical civil society on the other.¹⁴ The fact that de Tocqueville was able to discern this process as early as the 1830s is indicative of the prototypical status of American society within contemporary discussions of the wider formation of mass culture. Throughout the course of the century, European observers viewed the United States as the paradigmatic site of a democratically expanded public sphere, and, hence, of the phenomenon of publicity in its modern sense.

During his first visit to America in 1883, for example, another renowned cultural critic – Matthew Arnold – was struck by the same phenomenon as de Tocqueville. In a letter to his sister Frances,

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Arnold recorded his immediate sense of the 'blaring publicity of this place', which went 'beyond all that I had any idea of'.¹⁵ Interestingly, in his essay 'A Word about America' (1882), written before he had actually embarked upon this visit, Arnold cited James's novel *Roderick Hudson* as an authoritative source for his prejudicial view of the homogenous Philistinism of American society. James later returned the compliment by writing a supportive essay on Arnold which was published during the course of his American lecture tour.¹⁶ Both Arnold and James, in other words, exhibited a concern with the effects of American mass culture that was not only mutual, but also mutually admiring. This degree of proximity might again lead us to conclude that James's cultural criticism is affiliated, at least in part, to the liberal tradition of which Arnold was undoubtedly the most influential, late-nineteenth-century exemplar. One of the most obvious differences between James and his European precursors, however, is that, unlike the latter, James was also affiliated to the object of this critique. As a displaced American, James was capable, on occasions, of adopting a haughty, Arnoldian style of censure, whilst, at the same time, being saturated in the cultural forms which Arnold merely surveyed. James was both more aware of the phenomenon of publicity, and more ambivalent towards it, than Arnold ever was.

By suggesting an affinity between James and Arnold, one must, nevertheless, confront the charge of cultural conservatism which is routinely levelled against both writers. From what I have already said about the importance of James's inheritance of a particular strand of Enlightenment political thought, it should be clear that the blanket label of 'conservatism' is, at best, misleading. In his extensive reading of *The Bostonians*, Alfred Habegger, for example, has construed James's opposition to (a certain form of) publicity, and his concomitant defence of the value of privacy, as offering support to the reactionary politics of Basil Ransom. For Habegger, modern publicity is unquestionably equivalent to the democratic 'openness' which it continues to espouse, whereas privacy invariably represents an insidious occlusion of power.¹⁷ The problem with this argument, however, is that it depends upon the very criteria of James's critique in order to attack it. It is precisely these normative assumptions of equivalence which James himself makes in the act of recognizing their absence from modern forms of publicity. In *The Bostonians*, as elsewhere in James's fiction, 'publicity' can no longer simply be

opposed to 'privacy', as if this opposition represented the kind of stable ideological conflict which it did for much of the eighteenth century. Moreover, when James does invoke this opposition, the meanings attached to each term are characteristically inverted: publicity, as Habermas suggests, is itself experienced as a form of occlusion (signified, for example, by the closed site of the Boston newspaper office) whereas privacy is transfigured into an impossible state of freedom. Even these significations, however, are by no means adequate to describe the complex reconfiguration of meaning and value within the terms 'public' and 'private', which I will be attempting to trace.

In saying this, my intention is not to deny the existence of a conservative element within much of James's social and political thought, but, rather, to suggest that the question of James's politics has too often been polarized between inadequate and imprecise alternatives. Thus, while James is often viewed (negatively) as 'conservative' in his social attitudes, he is also often viewed (sympathetically) as 'radical' in his textual or aesthetic strategies. With regard to the former, it is certainly true that James's response to the emergence of mass culture suffered from the same cultural anxieties which afflicted many of his contemporaries. The very notion of a 'mass' culture was one that preoccupied James throughout his career, as his numerous critical essays on the state of contemporary literature reveal. During the late nineteenth century this notion was linked not only to questions of class distinction, but also, as Andreas Huyssen has shown, to those of gender.¹⁸ It is not coincidental, then, that narratives of 'democratization' should so often coalesce with narratives of 'feminization' in James's criticism and fiction; nor is it inappropriate that James's response to the increasing visibility of women within the public sphere should be identified as a central aspect of his wider relationship to the mass market.¹⁹ In this context, however, what is notable about a novel such as *The Bostonians* is the fact that James so openly confronts the question of the political legitimacy of the bourgeois public sphere. Here, as elsewhere, James does not simply invoke an idealized antithesis to the communicative practices of the mass media, and nor does he chart a straightforward narrative of cultural decline. By tracing the emergence of rival forms of public discourse in the novel, James demonstrates an awareness of the specifically gendered character of those normative assumptions upon which his own critique of modern publicity rests; and, in this