Dear Workshop Participants,

Thank you for taking the time to read this short paper! I presented a similar version of it at the Henry James Conference last year. My audience seemed to really enjoy it, and there has been interest in expanding it. I’m at a point, however, where I don’t know what to do with it. The paper below is essentially a compounded version of three *different* papers I wrote last year (one on James, one on noise abatement campaigns, and one on trauma), so if you’re ever wondering, “Why does that relate?” that’s a perfectly legitimate question.

This leaves workshop discussion very open, as I’m essentially wondering what to make of this if I am to lengthen it, chop it up, or start over completely. So some questions:

* Are there moments I lose you? Are there things you think just don’t make sense and I should nix all together? What key terms don’t work or need further buttressing with external resources?
* What works the best? Which key terms / themes / ideas should I focus on in a revision?
* *What would you add? Who am I missing? Where should the focus really lie?* Advisers have suggested making the focus street noise itself and expanding to later Modernists like Woolf. Is this a good direction to go in or should I stick with just James? My original long James paper also considered other James novels. Should I add those back in?
* In rereading it, I actually became particularly confused at my own conclusion: but if you’re not, I’d love to hear what *you* think I was saying. (Though by way of explanation, the nod to commemoration at the end is because the conference was on “commemoration.”)

These are very broad questions, but since I’m looking at the paper that follows as a springboard, we can rip it up and start again.

Thanks!  
Dana

P.S. It’s obviously longer than a conference paper, but that’s because I’ve added footnotes, some external sources, and contextual information so that this paper is legible for more than just James scholars. The extra stuff has made it a little less smooth and colloquial, but I’m hoping, more understandable.

Dana Walters

20th/21st C. Workshop

20 February 2017

Clatter, Chatter, Tick: Henry James’s Late Style and Voicing Noise in *The Wings of the Dove*

Part I

Before I talk to you about James’s written renderings of noise, I want to talk to you about pavement. Around the end of the nineteenth century, progressive activists urging a quieter streetscape in London and New York City looked to asphalt as a possible remedy to what they saw as a truly modern ill. The problem — which wasn’t new nor even modern — was noise. A slippery category, noise is and was a loose term for a subjectively variable catalogue of annoyances. To the individual ear, almost any aural phenomenon might present as noise. But in 1900, one localizable and collectively-agreed upon piece of this noise arose out of the clash of street surfaces and transportation vehicles. Before the smoothness and pervasiveness of asphalt, that clash produced a cacophony of clatter: an endless assault of rattling carts, horse hooves, and wheels upon cobblestones, granite, bricks, and other materials with little consistency or uniformity (Goldsmith 137; Bijsterveld 98). Soon, with both asphalt and automobiles on the streets, urban denizens hoped that — at the very least — *this* type of noise was on its way out.

The idea that clatter might be moved or displaced through material means holds suggestive resonances with a moment in one of James’s last novels. In the 1902 *The Wings of the Dove*, the heiress Milly Theale is also on her way out, so to speak. She is ill. Everyone knows; few are supposed to know. But, one day in London, while sitting with the potential romantic interest Merton Densher, she arranges a noise — a carriage’s clatter — to announce her departure from the scene. James writes, “[The silence] was filled for them the next thing by the sound, rather voluminous for the August afternoon, of the approach, in the street below them, of heavy carriage-wheels and of horses trained to ‘step.’ A rumble, a great shake, a considerable effective clatter, had been apparently succeeded by a pause at the door of the hotel, which was in turn accompanied by a due display of diminished prancing and stamping.” Immediately following, Densher laughs, remarking: “‘You’ve a visitor…and it must be at least an ambassador.’” In this moment, Milly’s clatter is routed through the purchasing power of her money. Instead of accidental or discordant, it sounds diplomatic and extravagant. The noise — and the “waiting chariot” it signifies, after all — is bought. “Isn’t it wonderful?” she asks. “She was going out, and he [the gentleman in question, that is] musn’t stand in her way” (*Wings* 302).

In this paper, I trace noise on its way out: from the impersonal atmospheric result of material convergences toward a refined, almost-pinned-down note of new meaning. My argument revolves around Milly’s clatter as it resonates with, springs from, and cites James’s clatter. On the page, Milly’s “clatter” is jargon — easily understood within the contours of the plot and yet suggestive of a sound ungrasped by language. Here, I situate this noise within an Anglo-American, turn-of-the-century soundscape that sought to define the public nuisance of noise in order to eradicate it. In this context, activists and engineers seeking to give mathematical precision and linguistic shape to the amorphous, ephemeral, and unstable idea of noise, had to give it new material grounding. That is, they had to translate it into a new medium — at first, the silent surface of paper — repeating it numerically and graphically and verbally to arrive at some different degree of comprehension. For such historical grounding beyond sound-reproducing technologies, this paper is informed by sound and media work by Emily Thompson, Jonathan Sterne, and John Picker, among others, who each help to elucidate how publics were changing their private relationships with noise at the turn of the century.

Likewise, Jamesian textual noise operates on this public / private divide: noting the subjective definition of what, in fact, constitutes “noise,” clatter can — importantly — become personally legible even if it continues to ring with obscurity for others.[[1]](#footnote-1) Textually-constituted noise smacks of this personal relation. Repeating the public intrusion in a different medium, the author’s voice chooses, speaks, and writes “clatter.” Others might hear “rumbling” and “rattling.” Each term is allusive, suggestive, but not reductive. Textual noise repeats actual noise in mnemonic terms, which is really another thing altogether.

In his Bryn Mawr commencement speech, James places noise within an elocutionary framework: it is an excess to proper diction.[[2]](#footnote-2) Sound studies critic Barry Truax calls it “unpatterned” information, “beyond our current comprehension” that “can only act … as a symbol of the future” (88). Truax’s framework alludes to the temporal quality of noise: as it disappears and repeats in thought, it becomes something else. For Milly in *The Wings of the Dove*, as with James in his personal writings, the echo of noise allows for a new, personal enclosure, restructuring it within the imagination in order to produce suggestive meaning out of what sounds like obscurity. Key here is the sense of possibility that might lie in noise. I want to propose that noise, which might connote waste, a lack of control, and a stubborn resistance to being pinned down, *seemingly* becomes pinned down when it’s repeated to become a personal referent in James’s work. In this paper, noise suggests an excess of sound in which meaning is delayed. This essay then has two parts: first, a brief foray into history, then the James.

Part II

First, some tidbits from history. James himself wasn’t formally into noise abatement, but those in his circle were. Significantly, William Dean Howells, James’s longtime friend and correspondent, become vice-president of the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noises in New York City at the club’s formation. *The New York Times* announced the society in December 1906, shortly after James’s U.S. tour (Thompson 121-2; “The Campaign Against Noise” 22).[[3]](#footnote-3)While visiting, James himself would wonder how some of the “uglier inimitable notes” of the U.S. had been preserved, including “the rude cavities, the loose cobbles, the dislodged supports, [and] the unreclaimed pools, of the roadway” (*The American Scene* 5-6). In this stubborn material decay, one reads an implicit threat of clatter, hearkening to recollections of New York streetscapes in his autobiographies that arepresented with more fondness. In *The New York Times,* Howells would lament how noise was a comparative, subjective problem. All these symbols of progress didn’t seem so noisy when they were new, he explained (“Campaign” 22). But for these activists arguing for limits to the public intrusion of sound, part of the problem with controlling noise in the early twentieth century was a weak ability to define or measure it. You can’t eradicate something you can’t very well identify.

Relative to other noise abatement societies across the U.S. and Europe, the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noises in New York City managed to effect change thanks to a savvy strategy of translating the subjective experience of noise for a wider collective (Smilor, “Cacophony” 25). Earlier, alienating efforts by Carlyle and Dickens in London had emphasized the protected, mental space of middle class literary intellectuals. New York efforts, however, revolved around noise as a matter of health, an affront to the body itself (Picker 52-65). As a strategy, corporeal investment effectively emphasized the public *and* private affront that was noise. A public nuisance, noise might still be felt personally through the common experience of embodiment. Routing noise’s semantic difficulty *through* the body was but one way of translating its irreducibility. In 1900, then, this semantic instability also left it open to interpretation. If its representation as “disorder” or “chaos” or “unwanted sound” made it subjectively frustrating to those assaulted by the daily occurrence, then it was also available, so to speak, to be marshaled toward imaginative translation.[[4]](#footnote-4) As I move to discuss James’s fictional work, I’m interested in this idea: clatter’s penetrative and irreducible presence reveals the vulnerability of the body *and* the power of the mind for imaginative communication.

Coincidentally, the most characteristic Jamesian noise still cutting through the silent communication of the page enters the author’s universe as a result of a bodily vulnerability. From Mark Seltzer to Pamela Thurschwell to more recent work by Hazel Hutchison, James’s physical inability to write (the result of wrist pain) and his turn toward dictation in 1897, has been a source of endless fascination and critical commentary. Perhaps most famously analyzed is the relationship between James, the typewriter, and the amanuensis he adopted: his last typist, Theodora Bosanquet, would note the author’s incapacity to write at all without the “responsive sound” of the Remington typewriter. “He found it more difficult to compose to the music of any other make,” she writes (248).

But, I’m less interested in the technological, magical, or prosthetic dimension here than the sound itself. The excess. The noise. As Hutchison has noted, James’s 1897 letters document the new typewriter as an excess of materiality *and* an excess of noise necessary by which to “bridge the silence” between James and his friends (157). Tracing these letters through to James’s ease with the new mechanical presence in his compositional practice one comes to see how the repetition of the ticks or clicks, as they were variously called, into a lifelong accompaniment of clatter helps them to signify anew. The clatter moves from an echo of thought obscuring the message to a “spur” promoting it. The repetitive movement from tick to tick functions citationally, positively recollecting each prior instance, while also asserting new temporal moments into a buildup of excess.[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, late Jamesian style communicates this excess: a sense of clambering about within memories irreducible to experiences and senses that prove irreducible to notation. Transcriptions of James’s “Remingtonese” — as he called it — are new forms arising from such scenes of the multiple: the convergence of voice and tick into the silent page that recalls the compositional moment (as many critics like to do), while similarly gesturing at the background noise left behind.

James’s critical and personal writing frequently expresses how the limits of representation are actually its potentiality; how the suggestive shouldn’t give away the secret, but that holding the secret is part of the fun. Noise is but one aspect of this puzzle, a place for sound where meaning is delayed leaves room open for new potential. In *A Small Boy and Others*, for instance, the translation of “inward experience” into the “exterior” form of the autobiographical account turns the disturbance of a “protuberantly-paved and peculiarly resonant small court” in France into a “clatter of response.” Put through the comb of memory, this is a clatter that becomes the “comprehensive echo of all old Paris” (196). Likewise, the violence of repercussions from the New York pavement seeping into James’s schoolroom enter into a scene of memory marked not by misery but one rimmed with “a dusty golden light” (123-4). In the textual repetition, these are moments of clatter made personal. They are translated from what appears as public noise intruding into private space through to private sound repeated for public purposes. Recalling the procedures of New York noise abatement and noise’s slippery instability, one might say that each memory’s textual recording silences the clatter, pinning it down for subsequent renewal in the reading act. Each renewal, however, still gestures at a lingering excess. This excess arises in a stylistic difficulty that is, in itself, resonant of a noise “irreducible to notation.”

But there is more pertinent precedent for seeing Jamesian style as grounded in a kind of noise. And this has to do not with James’s definitions of noise or clatter, but with his own discovery of style, which he happened upon one day as a youth in the Louvre. “We were not yet aware of style,” he writes, referring to himself and his brother, William James, “though on the way to become so, but were aware of mystery, which indeed was one of its forms.” In *A Small Boy and Others*, style most frequently asserts itself on the facades of houses. Here, though, it appears to him in a painting by Delacroix, “touched,” he notes, by the “ineffable, the inscrutable … the incalculable.” But what’s ever so intriguing about this first presentation of style is that its appearance in visual form translates, to his mind, into its aural analogue: the gallery becomes akin to a “vast deafening chorus.” He explains the pictures’ effect on his memory:

I shall never forget how—speaking, that is, for my own sense—they filled those vast halls with the influence rather of some complicated sound, diffused and reverberant, than of such visibilities as one could directly deal with. To distinguish among these, in the charged and coloured and confounding air, was difficult—it discouraged and defied; which was doubtless why my impression originally best entertained was that of those magnificent parts of the great gallery simply not inviting us to distinguish. (*A Small Boy and Others* 208)

In this moment, style becomes noise: defying particularity and resonating with mystery, only becoming personally referential as “style” later in life.

Part III

It’s on this note that I want to return to *The Wings of the Dove*. First published in 1902 and later gently revised for James’s 1909 New York Edition, *The Wings of the Dove* tells the story of a trio of characters: the American heiress Milly Theale, the impoverished newspaperman Merton Densher, and the beautiful and ambitious Kate Croy. With the latter two secretly engaged but without the money to fund the life Kate has grown accustomed to, the novel details a scheme to entrap Milly — whose mortal illness has traveled the gossip mill — to fall in love with Densher. Her eventual demise would, Kate believes, ensure a comfortable life for both living parties. Of course, all sorts of things go awry, and even after Milly dies *and* leaves the fortune to Densher, neither he nor Kate agree to accept the blood-stained money. Like many a James novel, the reader doesn’t know what much happens next, but you can be pretty sure all of those involved are pretty miserable.

In the scene where I began, it is the ill-fated Milly trying to grasp and control the situation. There, one might trace the crafting of a kind of personal note out of a noise generated in and for public display through material translation. One might say Milly strategically “places” the clatter of the carriage. In turn, that clatter resounds a private meaning for a broader social sphere that cannot close their ears to her rumble. She detaches the noise from its original circumstances and re-inscribes it with what her companion, Merton Densher, interprets as a sound worthy of an “ambassador.” In this event, her strategic clatter toggles between the personal and the public, the meaningful and the anonymous. If Jamesian noise operates on a delay, then it is apt for an imaginative encounter of this kind. Milly’s clatter is the appropriation of a collective annoyance translated through private desires. But let’s retreat a bit: I want to drop us down properly in this moment.

This isn’t the first time that the reader hears the clatter of a carriage. Milly’s hansom actually sounds an echo of the first. This first carriage is Kate, arriving to see Milly after the latter’s portentous appointment with Sir Luke Strett, the doctor who has just told Milly of her fate in strange and obscure terms. (He never actually says she’s dying, but his *carpe diem* attitude makes us all infer). Kate arrives, “specifically and publicly moreover, in a hansom that, driven apparently very fast, pulled up beneath their windows almost with the clatter of an accident, a ‘smash’” (*Wings* 207). Crucially, Milly overhears the noise from the windows to her balcony. That the “clatter” is but “almost a clatter” might be Milly’s interpretive failure — an inability to distinguish from afar — or that the note sounded holds a suggestive impulse that opens it up to potential in her ears. Milly’s later “clatter” is an effect, placed or purchased, by the heiress herself; this first clatter is all accident, all hapless driving. With horses “trained to ‘step,’” the echo of clatter is what, perhaps, Milly thinks freedom might sound like.

Later, when Milly sits alone with Densher in a silence fraught with the unsaid, the noise outside dispels the weighty wonderings palpable in the air, redirecting attention from what is known, what is said, and what is held back toward this exterior excess. In a manner consistent with the penetrating intrusion of clatter, this is a scene that lays bare the novel’s thematic and formal interest in determination, discrimination, and control. Certain topics, James writes, are “banished.” Milly hides her illness, unaware of what Densher knows, and Densher hides the particulars of his relationship with Kate, seemingly aware of what Milly knows. In the moment Milly’s carriage arrives, it is Kate they are talking around. Densher considers each word carefully, insecure about what language might reveal. Silence falls, giving Densher the opportunity to reflect on how he might speak and adequately “reflect truth” at all. At that moment, Densher holds the key role of center of consciousness.[[6]](#footnote-6) Witnessing his mind toiling and spiraling into James’s conditional mode, the reader is subject to all the possibilities of action delayed by his thought. In the silence, the Densher / James mash-up of narration suddenly becomes aware of a “sound, rather voluminous for the August afternoon, of the approach, in the street below them, of heavy-carriage-wheels and of horses trained to ‘step’” (303). Repeatedly paused by the rhythm of the punctuation, the text breaks up any register of continuity as the clatter sounds. Densher finds the scene “rococo,” but appropriate. To his ears, it is suitable that Milly should be marked with a sound commensurate with the loudness of her riches. It is even more suitable that the accidental clatter of Kate should now resonate with the sound of Milly’s money, the very object the scheming couple seek.

Milly’s echo of Kate isn’t that surprising. This is, after all, a book filled with doubles.[[7]](#footnote-7) But I want to take this reiteration of clatter and suggest that the citation plays with Milly’s troubled relationship with determination and control in a manner that gestures toward some of the considerations around noise I’ve presented. Other notable Jamesian noises often show themselves as external or “shared” noises, at first difficult to distinguish, later becoming haunting figures of the mind. For instance, the “echoes” reverberating in the galleried hall at the beginning of *The Golden Bowl* areat first a “property of the air” (James, *The Golden Bowl* 141) Later, a “strange wail” within the same space becomes a property of the character Maggie Verver’s head, a “high coerced quaver” from which she seeks refuge (James 514). Likewise, the overheard “twitter” of the birds and the faint “cry of a child” outside the governess’s rooms in *The Turn of the Screw* immediately brings up questions of where a noise belongs: is it inside or outside the window (James, *Turn* 124)? Is it inside or outside the head? Both noises halt externally but enter the mind before they dissipate. There, it might be formed for textual relation without reducing its pleasurable difficulty.

Part IV

In 1902, noise might be difficult to control and difficult to define, but this indistinctness contributes to its rematerialization in other means. Milly controls her noise, celebrating how a sound that is at first accident might become luxury for one and freedom for another. This freedom, as Kevin Ohi has suggested, might in fact be style. Drawing on two essays that posit James’s theory of the novel, “The Art of Fiction” and “The Future of the Novel,” Ohi notes that “Freedom, in both essays, marks a liberation from mimetic models” (17). This could have intriguing implications for what it means for Milly to mimic Kate’s noise, turning it into a personal referent. This transformation serves, in some part, as an access point to how she might enter “the real thing”: to her, in the park after Sir Luke Strett has told her to “live!,” “the real thing” is “the inspiringly impersonal … grey immensity of London.” Her personal note is an indulgence in “the great common anxiety,” a shared yet singular concern (*Wings* 201).

Milly determines her world in the only way she can: through her money. Her body remains quite beyond her abilities to extend. Paradoxically, it is noise that reveals the porousness and the vulnerability of the body as it contends with an inability to shut noise out. This is something New York’s successful efforts at noise abatement might teach us: only by translating noise and gesturing at the body — a personal, yet shared concern — might one explain the internal disturbance in public means. And in that sense, Milly’s noise does some of the work James’s noise does: where the body shows its wear and tear, noise makes itself heard. Where the voice fails to really elucidate the personal note — a note that is at once the tick and the voice combined — the translated material of noise communicates a resonant excess: one that suggestively grapples with what noise was on its way out.

The click of the typewriter was a particularly personal note for James; it makes sense that it wouldn’t necessarily tick productively for others. Three months before James died, the Remington Typewriter Company began consulting with the acoustician Wallace Sabine in an attempt to dampen the noise of their writing machines (Thompson 78). There had been complaints. For many, the “ticks” that spurred James’s creative endeavors could only communicate themselves as “enem[ies] of progress,” connoting waste in a culture increasingly obsessed with efficiency (Thompson 130). James, of course, was no friend to efficiency. Many of his novels, after all, were short stories that escaped themselves. “Everything counts, nothing is superfluous,” he wrote in the preface to *Roderick Hudson* (*The Art of the Novel* 3). Even the noise.

In the writing process, however, noise becomes legible. In the case of late James, legibility doesn’t necessarily clamp down on the obscurity. There’s that popular saying oft repeated (most recently by Fredric Jameson), that, the circumlocution of late James works itself out when it’s rendered back into its original oral format. I’m not sure this is the case, but I’m also hesitant to say clarifying James is the point of reading James. Instead, I might suggest it is multiple readings of James that does the best work at commemorating what James himself instilled in the text: a noise that is difficult, obscuring, and spirals out in imaginative ways. It is a noise that can be reformed within successive iterations, delightfully dependent on whatever way you read it: silently or aloud.

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1. Personal is a term I will use throughout the paper: I use James’s definition which Oliver Herford helpfully summarizes as “a friendly cooperation of biographical and autobiographical impulses in the act of retrospect” (*Henry James’s Style of Retrospect* 14). “Personal,” here, is a discursive formation that comes about through the happy acknowledgment of an intimate relation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It’s important to note that James’s idea of what constitutes proper diction arises from a xenophobic stance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James had been living in Britain and Europe, although his fiction still very much springs from his curious relationship to his homeland. The U.S. tour, which was funded by speaking engagements, was his first return after almost two decades. His travels are catalogued in *The American Scene*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Julia Barnett Rice, the popular advocate of noise abatement who founded the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noises and is related in almost every book or article on noise abatement, famously hired Columbia Law School students to walk up and down the Hudson River, tracking the number of tugboat sounds coming from the river *as well as* asking passersbys for their impressions and descriptions (Prochnik 208). For the best resource on Rice, see Emily Thompson’s *The Soundscape of Modernity*, among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. When Pamela Thurschwell analyzes James’s technological spur in relation to Bosanquet’s mediating position between the typewriter and the author, she notes, “When information travels it changes— it becomes open to reinterpretation and negotiation, it is cathected and de-cathected in new ways” (90). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James coined the term “center of consciousness” in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. The term refers to James’s use of free indirect style focalized through a particular character. In novels like *Portrait* and *The Ambassadors*, James attests to the singularity of the vision – the narrative is attached to only one “center.” In *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, centers guide different sections of the narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on doubles in *Wings*, see Ohi, Chapter 2. In *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James,* J. Hillis Miller also usefully talks about the performative effect of doubling and repetition in James broadly. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)