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"The Princess Casamassima" Between Balzac and Conrad

I

In the years 1902 and 1903, Henry James completed his greatest creative effort, the trilogy of *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove,* and *The Golden Bowl.* In the same years he also published an essay on each of his three great French masters and *confrères* — Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola.[1]

Of the three, one would expect Flaubert — because of his devotion to his craft and interest in style and form — to be nearest to James' sympathies, nearer, certainly, then the founder of Naturalism and the 'experimental' novel. However, in spite of his respect for Flaubert's professional skill and his ability to write, James makes a severe criticism of Flaubert, one which is in essence identical with his objections to Zola. Flaubert chose "as special conduits of the life he proposed to depict, such inferior, and in the case of Frédéric, such abject human specimens". We neither can, nor do we wish, to communicate with the central character of *L'Education Sentimentale.* "The states of soul" in "the Emma Bovarys, the Frédérics, the Bouvards and the Pecuchets . . ." must be supposed to be "of the simple kind". So in Flaubert, "the comparatively meager human consciousness . . . is struggling with the absolutely large artistic".

Similarly, Zola is judged as tied to his "magnificent treadmill of the pigeonholed and documented". In *Les Rougon--Macquart* "the danger of the mechanical" is "all confident and triumphant", the individual life is "reflected in coarse and common, in generalised terms". But while books like *La Vérité* are "without the vision of human experience, in *L'Assommoir,* in *Germinal,* in *La Débâcle,* Zola's sacrifice "to the common"

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[1] Reprinted in *Notes on Novelists,* London, 1914.

is "ordered and fruitful, for the subject and the treatment harmonise and work together". The limitations of Zola's taste and vision are, paradoxically, turned into virtues, because in his masterpieces all parts are functional, mutually helpful, and suffused with a rich, full, and sustained tone. "I doubt", says James, "if there has ever been a more totally *represented* world, anything more founded and established, more provided for all round, more organised and carried on".

An appreciation of this same quality, on an immensely bigger scale is, in fact, the starting point of his eulogistic evaluation of Balzac. He is impressed by the size and intensity of his work. "Balzac's plan was simply to do everything that could be done ... The whole thing, it is impossible not to keep repeating, was what he deemed treatable ... What he did above all was to read the universe, as loud as he could, *into* the France of his time". As a critic, James is at a loss how to approach this monumental achievement. "The way to judge him is to try to walk all around him — on which we see how remarkably far we have to go". Yet he never comes to grips with the actual writings, except for a few remarks on *Le Curé du Village,* and on *Les Deux Jeunes Mariées* to which his essay was to serve as an introduction.

Two years later, in 1904, James paid his much postponed visit to the United States. This was an occasion for the American literary public to feast and honour him as their own great native writer, and it is significant that he chose to appear before audiences in several parts of the country with a lecture on "The Lesson of Balzac".[2] This too was not an exercise in criticism, it was, instead, the public acknowledgement of "an emulous fellow-worker, who has learned from him more of the lessons of the engaging mystery of fiction than from anyone else". James does not merely claim that Balzac's works acted upon him as an influence or inspiration, he sees in him the highest norm and standard of his craft: "When I think, either with envy or with terror, of the nature and the effort of the Novelist, I think of something that reaches its highest expression in him ... We do not ... get away from him; he is behind us, at the worst, when he is not before, and I feel that any course about the country we explore is ever best held by keeping him, through the trees of the forest, in sight".

James himself continued to do so, and in 1913 the publication of Balzac's biography by Emile Faguet was an incitement to him to write, at the age of seventy, yet another essay on Balzac.[3] His ideas are substantially the same as before, but this

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[2] Henry James, *The Future of the Novel,* ed. by Leon Edel, New York, 1956.

[3] *Notes on Novelists.*

time he also makes a characteristic stricture. Balzac's genius, he maintains, "fails to take in whatever fine truth experience may have vouchsafed to us about... the inward life of the mind, the *cultivated* consciousness". His imagination and "efficient sympathy" break down with "ostensibly higher spirits", his truest and vividest people are "simplified mostly to singleness of motive and passion and interest". This is, in fact, a rewording of James's earlier objections to Flaubert and Zola. Also, in his essay of 1902 James had already noted the enormous interest in "things" which for Balzac are "francs and centimes more than any others... I am not sure that he does not see characters too, see passion, motive, personality, as quite in the order of the 'things' I have spoken of".

James had just published *The Wings of the Dove,* his magnificent vision of evil embodied in economic materialism. Money and wealth are in the centre of the story, yet what the book is really about is a conflict between moral awareness and the coarsening and corruption of sensibility. In terms of action and drama the inspiration for *The Wings of the Dove* must have been fostered and sustained by Balzac's permanent presence in James's imagination. Borrowings of symbolic details from *Seraphita,* or of ideas (in the *Ambassadors)* from *Louis Lambert* are of minor interest.[4] It is rather Balzac's domination over James's total vision of a story, his command of narrative procedure, which suggests the full impact of the Master's "lesson".

The early years of his apprenticeship James spent thoroughly immersed in the Human Comedy. This is amply borne out by his earliest essay on Balzac[5] written in the year in which he also published his first novel *Roderick Hudson* (1875). He quotes generously from a number of Balzac's books in order to suggest Balzac's particular gifts in the portrayal of places, people, and scenes. And indeed, several characters in the early pages of *Roderick Hudson,* before the novel is properly launched into its Hawthornian direction, are completely Balzacian. As he recalled many years later, James had Balzac in mind when he laid the opening of his novel in a small American *ville de province,* though-"one was not in the least, in one's prudence, emulating his systematic closeness".[6] Nor is there a noticeable Balzac pattern in control of the plot. The case is different, however, in the *Princess Casamassima,* in which a number of situations and characters from *Roderick Hudson* are re-set in a new

[4] Oscar Cargill, *The Novels of Henry James,* New York, 1961, pp. 329, 336, 378.

[5] *French Poets and Novelists,* London, 1878.

[6] *The Art of the Novel,* London and New York, 1953, p. 9.

context. This incidentally, is a typical Balzac method to which James practically never again recurred.

Professor Trilling sees the *Princess Casamassima* as belonging to a line of nineteenth century novels about the Young Man from the Provinces,[7] and John Roland Dove has traced many analogies between James's work and Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir,*[8] a book which, it is curious to add, James once declared to be unreadable.[9] In this context it is appropriate to draw a parallel between the *Princess* and Balzac's *Les Illusions Perdues.*

Lucien and Hyacinth both spend their childhood in humble circumstances; yet each has one parent who is of noble origin, and the resulting social ambiguity has a decisive influence upon the young man's personality. In each case there are two modest, devoted people taking care of the youth's fortune for as long as they are able to make him resist the temptations of the wide world. Lucien learns the printing trade, Hyacinth becomes a bookbinder, and both are artists by temperament. "Both of them, nursing great hopes for the future, possessed that high intelligence which places a man on an equal footing with all prominent personalities, yet they considered themselves thrown on to the bottom of society". This quotation from Balzac's novel describes most appropriately the analogy between Lucien's and Hyacinth's situation.

Each of them, furthermore, becomes fascinated by an aristocratic woman who exercises an ominous influence upon the young man and makes him change his initial life project. When each of the two has utterly committed himself to the standards acquired from his lady, both Mme de Bargeton and the Princess withdraw from their companionship. In both novels the beginning of an important development takes place in a theatre box during a performance, and it is mediated by the malignant agency of Sholto — and Rastignac (or Chatelet). Lucien's "other", younger woman is Coralie to Hyacinth's Millicent, his questionable friend is Chatelet to Hyacinth's Muniment.

Within this structure of relationships both heroes progress towards their ultimate ruin, and one may add that, apart from Roderick Hudson, Hyacinth is James's only protagonist who commits suicide — again like Lucien (who ends by hanging himself, though in a later novel).

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[7] *The Liberal Imagination,* New York, 1954, pp. 67—68.

[8] "The Alienated Hero in *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *The Princess Casamassima*", in *Studies in Comparative Literature,* ed. by Waldo F. McNeir, Baton Rouge, 1962.

[9] "Henry Beyle" in *The Nation,* September 17, 1874; reprinted in: Henry James, *Literary Reviews and Essays,* ed. by Albert Mordell, New York, 1957.

Yet the inner logic of action which involves the two heroes is in each novel, significantly, different. As the story develops, Balzac gradually produces a gigantic image of that particular aspect of France which is relevant to Lucien's story: the printing industry, journalism, the theatre, literature. In the end a whole world has been created, consistently ruled by doublefacedness, which is not only an abstraction of the physical shape of money, but also the method by which money works: creating bonds, yet disrupting relationships. Lucien's "singleness of motive and passion and interest"[10] makes him succeed — and eventually destroy him. He himself grows more experienced, and possibly somewhat mellower, but there is no change of direction, no re-examination or crisis of personality.

Hyacinth's failure, on the contrary, comes entirely from within: it is his anguish, the agony of his conscience, the spirit of reappraisal implicit in his intelligence, which makes him change his conviction and destroys the reason for his earlier committments. It is the dynamism of the world which crushes Lucien, it is the break within Hyacinth himself that gives the world around him a different, deadly meaning. Another parallel is illuminating here because it is so analogous: in Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* the escaped lover dies, and in spite of his repentance cannot return to make Eugénie happy; in James's *Washington Square* it is Catherine Sloper herself who refuses Maurice when he remorsefully returns to plead that she should accept him.

The hero, in other words, is placed in his situation in a particular manner which James learnt from Balzac. Yet Balzac's situations seem to be created by the world and they change according to the laws of nature and of society and history; James, the historian of fine consciences, does not pretend to deal with outside forces: he is alive to their existence, but his personalities undergo their own developments and transformations within the boundaries of their moral autonomy and according to their own inherent potentialities.

For this reason, too, it would be quite inappropriate to consider *The Princess Casamassima* in terms of "Zolaesque Continental fiction".[11] It is true that James professes to have been taking notes during his walks in London, and he probably had talks with Zola in the year before both *Germinal* and the first instalments of his own novel were published.[12] But his aim could hardly have been to get a close knowledge of proletarian life and the specific methods and issues in the working clas move-

[10] "Honoré de Balzac", 1913.

[11] Leon Edel, *Henry James*, Minneapolis, 1960, p. 26.

[12] *ibid.*, cf. Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Middle Years*, New York, 1962, pp. 179—180.

ment. Zola describes the life of miners, and presents politics as a part of their concrete world. James does not record a given state of affairs in its particularities. He offers his "gathered impressions and stirred perceptions"[13] in order to convey the impact of secret "subversive" activity on that part of society which, like James himself, was completely outside it.

The qualities which distinguish *The Princess Casamassima* from the procedures of the French masters deserve to be more fully scrutinized; they might help to place it both in relation to French realism and to twentieth-century developments. There must also be a direct connection between James's novel and details and attitudes in certain later works.

II

"I want to learn; and above all I want to know *à quoi m'en tenir*. Are we on the eve of great changes or are we not? Is everything that's gathering force underground, in the dark, in the night, in little hidden rooms, out of sight of governments and policemen and idiotic 'statesmen' — heaven save them! — is all this going to burst forth some fine morning and set the world on fire? Or is it to sputter out and spend itself in mean conspiracies, be dissipated in sterile heroisms and abortive isolated movements? I want to know à *quoi m'en tenir*", asks the Princess Casamassima.[14] This is not merely rational curiosity, inverted snobbism, or eagerness for unconventional entertainment. Christina is genuinely looking for something fresh, for passions and motives which are more natural and more complete than they are among her own class. She is "ready to give up everything — everything"; to sacrifice, that is to say, the security offered her by her status in society, and to "act *with*" the people if their disrupting force is real and solid. She is determined to see society: "to learn for myself what it really is before we blow it up".

The Princess's passion is shown as both magnificent and pernicious — because destructive of all personal bonds — yet James presents her behaviour as awe-inspiring and comical at the same time. On Christina's removal from Medley Hall to Madeira Crescent he comments that "it was plainly her theory that the right way to acquaint one's self with the sensations

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[13] *The Art of the Novel*, p. 76.

[14] All the quotations from *The Princess Casamassima* are taken from the Harper Torchbooks edition (New York and Evanston, 1962) which follows the text of the "New York Edition". The divergences between this and the original *Atlantic Monthly* version are so slight that they can be neglected for the purposes of this essay.

of the wretched was to suffer the anguish of exasperated taste"; and by a number of similar remarks he achieves an additional perspective over the Princess's own relation towards poverty and social action. Unlike Turgenev's Yelena, the heroine of *On the Eve,* that most inspiring model for *The Princess Casamassima,*[15] Christina is seen from the outside and is not herself the "reflector-consciousness" through which the revelations of the novel are gradually realized. She is to Hyacinth what in James's first novel — in which she too appeared, and remained *disponible* for another appearance — Roderick Hudson is to that archetype of all Jamesian observers, Rowland Mallet.

The Princess Casamassima is usually interpreted as being, in the first place, the history of Hyacinth Robinson and his crucifixion between the two worlds of the aristocracy and the people, of artistic sensibility and revolutionary action. Read in this way the novel must be found unsatisfactory, because only one of these two worlds is presented with rich particularity of circumstantial detail. It is enough to compare the ample description of the easy luxury at Medley Hall with the absolute absence not only of visual but even of atmospheric suggestion concerning the lodgings of the Muniments. The reader is not convinced by the radical utterances of Paul Muniment, because this character is not embedded in a substantial environment; and one is not led to imagine what it is in his background that could have incited the Princess to ask whether "this is the worst part" of the London slums.

One is, on the other hand, perfectly ready to believe in her own rebellion, even though at a remove of eighty years a princess's communication with anarchist leaders seems less credible then historical evidence actually allows. In terms of plot Hyacinth is in the centre of the story, yet in terms of presentation, of achieved fictional completion, this is in the first place the story of the Princess's world: not an analysis of her personal experience but the external picture of her interests, drives, and commitments. Nothing is revealed about her and Hyacinth's prying "into the wretchedness of London", and yet her answer to Mr. Vetch carries the felt awareness of a living, hidden reality beyond its own abstract rhetoric: "We've certainly inquired and explored together", the Princess admitted, "and in the depths of this huge, luxurious, wanton, wasteful city we've seen sights of unspeakable misery and horror".

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[15] The present writer deals with this parallel extensively in a separate article, "James's Novel of 'Looming Possibilities'", which will be published in *Renaissance and Modern Essays* in Honour of Vivian de Sola Pinto, London, 1966. Structural analogies with another Turgenev novel, *Virgin Soil,* have been analyzed by other authors (see Cargill, *o. c.*).

Then, in the next sentence, James makes her unconsciously undercut her own solemnity: "But we've been not only in the slums; we've been to a music-hall and a penny-reading". This is not only just another instance of James's characteristic irony, which is inherent in the development of every single one of his plots. In this novel it seems to be a result of James's own indecision, of a tension within James's own evaluation of the world which he presents. The assumption behind his writing is that he shares a point of view with his readers of supposedly similar education, economic status, capacity for esthetic appreciation, and insight into the working of society. Even though this assumption is no longer fully tenable it does not create major problems in the reading of most of his works. But in this book one is aware that, for instance, the repeated stress on the irregular pronunciation of the Cockney characters amounts to a pale cliché rather than to instances of valuable social observation. Yet there is also comedy on a much more significant level: the Princess, to give just one example, is completely unselfconscious in aligning herself with Hyacinth's subversive friends. She tells Hyacinth that, to her, English society is "a reproduction of the Roman world in its decadence, gouty, apoplectic, depraved, gorged and clogged with wealth and spoils, selfishness and scepticism, and waiting for the onset of the barabarians. You and I are the barbarians, you know".

Throughout the novel the Princess emerges as a symbol of the self-destructive urge gnawing at the roots of James's Europe. She is a danger envisaged as even more vital and inevitable because it survives its own innocence and is undeflected from its initial intention in spite of the ironic light to which it has been subjected throughout the narrative. At the same time she embodies most consistently the theme of search, exploration, and questioning, which are intricately involved with each, other and embrace the activities of all the other characters in the novel.

So Captain Sholto, a character both comic and unpleasant, engages to "look into the subject" for the sake of the Princess, to find out "what is really going on"; while Pinnie, Mr. Vetch, and Millicent watch, from a distance, Hyacinth's involvement with "strange friends, still stranger opinions", puzzled by what he fears and hopes, worried by the committments and relationships which they suspect him of maintaining. Millicent, the plebeian beauty, appealing in her "vulgar vitality" is all the time annoyed by Hyacinth's break away from respectability — in a manner unknown to her, and she accuses him of "prying about with his mad ideas" in the back slums of the city. The Prince, on the other hand, is enraged and insulted by his wife's surmised affiliation to "secret societies" and believes her to

"conspire, prepare horrible acts"; so that Mme Grandoni, who is equally perplexed by Christina's closeness to "wicked revolutionaries", tries to make him aware that the "tiresome" aspect of her activity is in fact that her friends are not "all scoundrels"! The one person who, though equally disapproving of the subversionist "firebrands", is not concerned with finding out unknown but imagined features of her friends' hidden life is Rose Muniment, who, tied to her sick bed in her little room, has provided herself with a full image of what the world which she is interested in really looks like. The self-effacing Aurora, who is the main minister to Rosie's needs, is the only character entirely engaged in practical, everyday activities for the sake of the poor, and is in that respect the only one completely outside the range of attitudes towards the "party of action". Muniment is on the opposite end: he is entirely involved in the revolutionary movement — but finds its main strength in its being "quiet as a grave", so that no one "suspects anything like the full extent of it". Thus even he does not open the inner secret of the gathering storm, and alluding to Hyacinth's meekness he is right in answering the Princess's enquiries: "Ah, Madam, the oaths *I* take I don't tell".

Hyacinth hovers all the time on the margin of the subterranean movement uncertain whether there is any genuine activity beyond the "hopeless sham" at "The Sun and Moon"; his international friends, the Poupins and Schinkel, are only a step nearer to the hidden reality of incipient subversion. (The one person at its centre, Hoffendahl, never directly appears on the scene!). Nor is Hyacinth familiar with genuine poverty at first hand, the "absolute paupers", "the hopeless and terribly poor". Yet it is his lot to be deprived of the traditional treasures of art and history, to be prevented from enjoying creative leisure which would suit his natural taste and inborn sensibility. His relationship with the Princess is essentially coloured by this handicap, since "her words evoked all sorts of shadowy suggestions of things he was condemned not to know, touching him most when he had not the key to them".

In this sense, Hyacinth's personal fortune dramatizes an individual extension of the general pattern of "guessing and suspecting", most fully represented by the Princess's attempt to grasp the concealed energies of the doomful underworld from which, according to the norms of social existence, she should be irrevocably excluded. Hyacinth's life is dominated by the feeling that he is an outsider to everything he would have most liked to enjoy; and the precarious friendship with the Princess thins away not under the pressure of events and circumstances, but under the pressure of an enlarged awareness, a new tension within his own cultivated consciousness. His widened experience

is completely subjective. His situation in the world has not changed, yet his attitude, his interpretation of the world, has.

The Princess Casamassima cannot be considered as a "novel of disillusion", which György Lukacs, in his *Studies in European Realism,* considers, *à propos Les Illusions Perdues,* to be a type of fiction created by Balzac. According to him, Balzac has also exhausted the extreme possibilities of this type, because his followers do not show the ultimate magnificent struggle against the capitalist degradation of man; instead, sadness has replaced the fighting spirit, and anger yields place to an impotently superior and contemplative irony. Lukacs has Flaubert and Zola in mind, but what he says may also apply to James's general attitude to society. It is, however, irrelevant to his vision and his achievement. Where Hyacinth's case is different from that of the pre-Jamesian protagonists is in the nature of his disillusion. He does not find himself deceived in his great expectations, nor is he disappointed in the solidity and moral rightness of a social order. He is disillusioned not with society, but with his own evaluation of it; and what gives his case a particular complexity is that his essential loyalties persist in spite of a basic shift in his sympathy. His change is not a switch of sides within the social sphere, but a shift of values: the esthetic becomes of paramount importance and overshadows the significance of social realities.

"The monuments and treasures of art", Hyacinth tells the Princess in his letter from Venice, "the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it, based if you will upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which, all the same, the world is less of a 'bloody sell' and life more of a lark — our friend Hoffendahl seems to me to hold them too cheap and to wish to substitute for them something in which I can't somehow believe as I do in things with which the yearnings and the tears of generations have been mixed".

This passage sums up Hyacinth's new attitude. It is cogent within its own terms, but inconsistent with the pattern of Hyacinth's whole personality. He speaks casually of "our friend Hoffendahl", though he says in the same letter that he immutably recognizes the obligation which he had taken with the oath allowing Hoffendahl to dispose with his life. Curiously too, "the yearnings and the tears of generations" refer to the achievements of art and power, though, significantly, the statement to believe "in things with which the yearnings and the tears of generations have been mixed" might by its wording naturally seem connected with Hyacinth's original committment to "the misery of the people". The sophisticated use of colloqui-

alisms like "the world is less of a 'bloody sell' and life more of a lark", the loving intimacy of a phrase like "this incomparable, abominable old Venice", can hardly belong to a realistically conceived character in Hyacinth's position. One is dissatisfied with Hyacinth not because the tension embodied in his character does not seem genuine, but because he so implausibly uses the diction and gestures of Henry James himself. In other words, in Hyacinth James did not create a hero who would face a given world with the strength of an independent, objectively envisaged character, like Julien Sorel or Lucien de Rubempré, or, indeed, like his own Isabel Archer, that "young woman affronting her destiny". He is, instead, a symbol of divided consciousness, dramatizing a clash within James's personal universe. It is hardly possible to believe that Hyacinth had ever been dedicated to the destruction of Society, or that he could have considered himself "a mere particle in the grey immensity of the people". The references to that effect, in the early parts of the book, strike one as preposterous instances of James's uneasy ironic detachment. Yet when, in the later chapters, Hyacinth is not only aware of the "poverty and ignorance" of the "direfully wretched", but is made to see them as "bedraggled, obscene, brutal", a "horrible populace", or "vermin", one surmises in these terms the feeling of abhorrence, anxiety, and fear of a suspected eruption of destructive hatred, through which James identified himself with the established society. Therefore, the book cannot simply be considered as a nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* on a theme with twentieth century connotations. It is not most satisfactory if seen as centred on a particular young man with a definite background, who gets involved in a social movement with a given cause which he grows to find uncongenial. If it is viewed as a hero's progres through the world in which he matures and ends by becoming conscious of his position towards his environment, it must seem that both terms of this relationship have slipped through the author's fingers. To write such a book one would have to be saturated with circumstantial knowledge, whether one's method ere that of factual description in the manner of Zola, or, instead, a Balzacian or Dickensian creation of a poetic reality, bigger and denser than everyday experience, yet full of recognizable sensuous detail. James had neither the artistic inclination nor the living experience necessary for such an approach; and his novel cannot but disappoint anyone who takes it up with that kind of realism in mind which it fails to convey. "Where the novel should be most dense, it is most porous", says Irving Howe.[16]

[16] *Politics and the Novel*, New York, 1957, p. 147.

This expectation is legitimate considering the urgency and persisting interest of the matters to which the novel is pointing. It defines the limitations of the novel in the perspective of a mode to which, by the outline of its plot, *The Princess Casamassima* could have properly belonged.

Essentially, however, here one is confronted with the permanent Jamesian problem of presentation, identical with the question which, he later wrote,[17] had occurred to him while he was struggling with his early *Roderick Hudson:* "How boil down so many facts in the alembic, so that the distilled result, the produced appearance, should have intensity, lucidity, brevity, beauty, all the merits required for my effect? . . . It didn't help, alas, it only maddened, to remember that Balzac would have known how, and would have asked no additional credit for it". Apparently, it was not in his mind that he was, in fact, striving for a method of forshortening and abstraction which was profoundly to revolutionize Balzac's method; but he was conscious of being confronted, as he goes on to say, with the most interesting question the artist has to consider. "To give the image and the sense of certain things while still keeping them subordinate to his plan, keeping them in relation to matters more immediate and apparent, to give all the sense, in a word, without all the substance or all the surface, . . . such a case of delicacy proposes itself at every turn to the painter of life who wishes both to treat his chosen subject and to confine his necessary picture".

To apply this meditation to *The Princess Casamassima,* James abstained, as he himself admitted, from displaying "the positive quantity in itself", which may be interpreted as the immediate forms of a "sinister anarchic underworld", and, more generally, "the weight of the burden of labour, the ignorance, the misery and the vice". He had an ambiguous fascination with a world outside that everyday pragmatic realm of relationships which to him appeared conveniently natural and accessible. His aim was to intimate the awareness of an uneasy consciousness: "The value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were precisely those of our not knowing, of society's not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what 'goes on' irreconcileably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface".

The pattern of attitudes which is here defined is most dramatically rendered, and at the same time transcended, not through Hyacinth, who is in the centre of the plot, but through Christina, the Princess Casamassima. That the novel should be named after her is, thus, fully justified. Significantly, she is the only Jamesian character to return in a later work as a major

[17] All the quotations of James's statements on method and artistic intention come from his collected prefaces, *The Art of the Novel.*

and more fully envisaged figure. He had felt that in *Roderick Hudson* she had not been "completely recorded". Could one say that this brilliant, elusive creature from his youthful novel potentially embodied the kind of bold, reckless interference with the structure of contemporary society, which a character like Hyacinth, into whom James more directly projected his own feelings and inhibitions, might never have been made to perform?

III

Generally speaking, the protagonist of James's novel stands as a link between the hero of the 19th century novel and the central minds in the 20th century novels of psychological experiment. *The Princess Casamassima,* however, also involves, a different area of the modern sensibilty, which can only be indirectly associated with the "cultivated consciousness" of the characters in his other works. In *The Destructive Element* Stephen Spender has pointed out that several figures in *The Princess Casamassima* are pertinent to contemporary politics, and Professor Trilling has shown how much of actual political detail has been worked into James's novel. This has been further substantiated by W. H. Tilley, who made a special study of the references to terrorist movements in *The Times* between 1881 and the writing of *The Princess Casamassima.*[18] At the same time, Irving Howe is right in saying that the novel "was an exercise in the sheer power, the grasping power, of intelligence to divine that which it did not really know".

It is precisely in the area of indirect rendering, in the creation of atmosphere, the suggesting of appropriate feelings, misgivings, and anxieties that James becomes the forerunner of the symbolic novelist of the twentieth century: "My scheme called for the suggested nearness (to all our apparently ordered life) of some sinister anarchic underworld, heaving in its pain, its power and its hate; a presentation not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances, vague motions and sounds and symptoms, just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities". All the implications of the usual Jamesian subjectivity acquire a recognizable social significance. The private agonies of a modern political consciousness can be, in all their intensities, potentially perceived in James's work: even the absurdity of active engagement as dramatized by Camus, the blind alleys of the Kafkian quest myths, pertinently come to mind. *The Princess Casamassima* conveys the feel of a politically determined extreme situation with all the autenticity of a modern mood

[18] *The Background of 'The Princess Casamassima'*, University of Florida Monographs, Humanities, No. 5, Fall 1960, Gainesville, Florida.

which has experienced modern crises of commitment. The "historian of fine consciousness" reached beyond his own limits of time forward into the century which, in English literature, was ushered in by Joseph Conrad's more fully articulated political imagination.

The author of *Nostromo* did not need a praticular literary incitement in order to deal with a contemporary political subject; the presence of *The Princess Casamassima* in *The Secret Agent* cannot, however, be denied.

This is a passage from the first paragraph of *The Princess Casamassima:*

> "At this time of day the boy was often planted in front of the little sweet-shop on the other side of the street, an establishment where periodical literature, as well as tough toffy and hard lollipops, was dispensed and where song-books and pictorial sheets were attractively exhibited in the small-paned dirty window. He used to stand there for half an hour at a time and spell out the first page of the romances in the *Family Herald* and the *London Journal,* where he particularly admired the obligatory illustration in which the noble characters (they were always of the highest birth) were presented to the carnal eye".

An here is a passage from the first page of *The Secret Agent:*

> "The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two-and-six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like *The Torch, The Gong* — rousing titles".

In this juxtaposition, Conrad's text seems to be full of ironic echoes of James's. The earlier writer mentions "the carnal eye" in connection with "noble characters ... of the highest birth"; the later one refers to carnality in terms of "undressed dancing girls" and incompletely specified objects in wrappers and envelopes in Mr. Verlock's shop window. Do not these, at the same time, imply a sly metaphoric interpretation of the "tough toffy and hard lollipops" which attracted little Hyacinth's attetntion? Equally so, the "dirty window" of the Jamesian sweet--shop seems to acquire an indirect meaning by the secret agent's suggestive display of pointers towards the sweets of sin. Hyacinth's interest, further, is also aroused by romances, yet this hero of future anarchist involvements looks at the *Family Herald* and the *London Journal;* not at *The Torch* and *The Gong,* the "rousing titles" in Conrad's more outspoken treatment of the same subject of anarchism.

The irony in James's novel, until the point at which he allows his apprehensions to take over, is part of his self-defensive tactics; his humane sympathy softening the absoluteness of his convictions in a permanent interplay with his social ease. Conrad, on his part, acute and narrow, consistent in a savage belligerence, believed "that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity."[19] Yet he, too, was hesitant: "I don't think" he wrote to a friend, "I've been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries — they are shams."[20] In another letter he admitted: "You well know that anarchy and anarchists are outside my experience; I know almost nothing of the philosophy, and nothing at all of the men."[21] And yet, as he remarked with amused pride in the prefatory note to his novel, "a visitor from America informed me that all sorts of revolutionary refugees in New York would have it that the book was written by somebody who knew a lot about them. This seemed to me a very high compliment, considering that, as a matter of hard fact, I had seen even less of their kind than the omniscient friend who gave me the first suggestion for the novel." James, on his part, recalled "pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no 'authentic' information", but arrived at Hyacinth's "subterraneous politics and occult affiliation" through his penetrating London imaginatively by his personal impressions.

If there was also any literary inspiration for his vision, the most obvious seems to have been Dickens. Hyacinth's mother dying on the prison bed: can one help remembering the beginning of *Oliver Twist?* The anonymous straggling shapes in the later pages of James's novel appear like generalized recollections of more particularly visualized street scenes where Dickens's London paupers moved. Conrad's London — and especially young Stevie's famous cab-ride to the almshouse with his mother and sister — has been frequently associated with the setting of characters in Dickens.[22] Is not, however, its more immediate source the cab-ride of little Hyacinth with the motherly Miss Pyncent in the early part of James's book? The irony in Con-

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[19] Author's Note to *The Secret Agent,* in Dent's Collected Edition, from which the quotation from the novel has also been taken.

[20] *Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters,* ed. by G. Jean-Aubry, London 1927, Vol. II, p. 59.

[21] *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 1890—1920,* ed. by J. A. Gee and F. J. Sturm, New Haven, 1940, pp. 116—17.

[22] In discussing *The Secret Agent,* F. R. Leavis says: "Conrad's London bears something of the same kind of relation to Dickens as Henry (*The Great Tradition,* Garden City, N. Y., 1954, p. 254.). The second of the quoted sentences is missing in the 1960 London impression of the book, and there are other alterations in the same passage modifying Leavis's estimation of Dickens's influence upon Conrad.

rad's treatment of this incident is more humane than in the rest of the novel — and bears comparison with the gentle humorousness of James's attitude towards "Pinnie". Several situations in Conrad's *The Secret Agent,* and in particular in the cab-ride chapter may be leading back to passages in James. (Miss Pyncent and little Hyacinth find their way, for instance, thanks to "a dozen confidential interviews with policemen, conductors of omnibuses and small shopkeepers", and Miss Pyncent wonders "why a prison should have such an evil air if it was erected in the interest of justice and order — a builded protest, precisely, against vice and villainy"). When, on the other hand, one reads that Miss Pyncent's "quondam comrade was serving out the sentence that had been substituted for the other (the unspeakable horror) almost when the halter was already round her neck", one associates this with the morbid grotesqueness of the whole Fagin-Sykes complex in Dickensian England, — and in particular with its coolly rationalized variant in Winnie Verloc's insistent memory of the newspaper account of a hanging: "The drop given was fourteen feet".

The analogies one detects in the two stories are fairly numerous, but many of them may be simply due to the fact that the subject of anarchist activity in London leads to a number of related themes. They are of minor interest only if they are no more than isolated details in the text; in order to be of literary significance they have to colour the works as wholes. Thus the central situation in James's plot is that of a great lady patronising an anarchist. In Conrad's book this motif returns in the Michaelis case, apparently a minor anecdote, an important, yet by no means basic knot in the narrative web. It is, however, one of the most brilliant instances of Conrad's social satire, illustrating his theme of how public activities of certain characters affect the private and secluded life of others, and how the domestic circumstances of an individual, like the Assistant Commissioner of Police, influence his behaviour in public matters. At the same time Conrad uses the same motif to give a decisive ironic twist to his story, a most representative sample of the method which he consistently applies throughout the book on the levels of both style and story.

James's Christina belongs to the type of an educated, rich, aristocratic lady, enthusiastically connected with revolutionary politics, that fascinated writers at the turn of the century. It implied an ominous, apocalyptic force within the very establishment whose foundations it was bent to undermine. Among writers in English, none endowed it with the poise and splendour of James's heroine, but there are interesting variants of the same type.

"Dont you know", says Mr. X in Conrad's "The Informer"[23] alluding to the pretty young heiress from Hermione Street, "... that an idle and selfish class loves to see mischief being made, even if it is made at its own expense? Its own life being all a matter of pose and gesture, it is unable to realize the power and the danger of a real movement and of words that have no sham meaning. It is all fun and sentiment. It is sufficient, for instance, to point out the attitude of the old French aristocracy towards the philosophers whose words were preparing the Great Revolution".

One remembers, encountering this historic parallel, the Princess Casamassima's disarming comparison of herself and Hyacinth with the barbarians plotting against Rome. James's irony includes benevolence faced by such naive freshness; Conrad's is scornful, because he sees his young lady as having "acquired all the appropriate gestures of revolutionary convictions, the gestures of pity, of anger, of indignation against the anti--humanitarian vices of the social class to which she belonged herself". Unlike her, James's Princess does not think that the movement is "all fun and sentiment". Instead, she anxiously inquires about it on one of the most touching and most excitingly writing *The Secret Agent,* he confided to Cunninghame Graham Could Conrad help having her in mind when, while he was writing *The Secret Agent,* he confided to Cunninghame Graham (in a letter of 7 October 1907):

> By Jove! If I had the necessary talent I would like to go for the true anarchist, which is the millionaire.

It is interesting to compare this passage with the following one from G. K. Chesterton's story *The Man Who Was Thursday,* first published in 1908:

> The poor have been rebels, but they have never been anarchist; they have more interest than anyone else in there being some decent govornment, ... The poor have sometimes objected to being governed badly; the rich have always objected to being governed at all. Aristocrats were always anarchists, as you can see from the baron's war.

A further step in the same direction is the connection between political nihilism and a wholesale cultivation of esthetic sensibility to which moral consideration is entirely irrelevant. This theme, central to "The Informer" is in its essence implemented by James's treatment of Osborne in *The Portrait of a Lady.* On the other hand, to Hyacinth's later development in *The Princess Casamassima* James seems to

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[23] In the Collection *A Set of Six.*

have been largely sympathetic. This is one of the ambiguities which he never fully resolved, and the tension within *The Princess Casamassima* feels like the author's own drama between his personal leanings and what he suspected to be more universally valid choices of behaviour.

According to Conrad, a fine conscience, which is James's subject, is one troubled by the nice discrimination of shades of conduct, one more concerned with essentials.[24] James's is a Balzacian awareness of the world, one might say, deepened and transcended in a direction which, like the search of Hyacinth Robinson, implies an intense feeling for the hidden significance of social action. It is a vision of life always inviting new exploration and interpretation, irreducible to any sort of established norm, and never likely to be relegated to history — because of the very constancy of its power to challenge.

[24] "Henry James" in *Notes on Life and Letters* (Dent's Collected Edition, p. 17).