THE FEMALE REVOLUTIONIST IN 19TH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION – HENRY JAMES'S CHRISTINA CASAMASSIMA

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Abstract: *Though commonly associated with the international theme as a means of juxtaposing two cultural patterns, the American and the European one, Henry James also demonstrated his interest in the ardent socio-political affairs of his time, one manifestation of this interest being found in "The Princess Casamassima"* (1886). *Among other characteristics, this novel is taken to fictionalise the involvement of women in radical politics at the turn of the 19th century, a phenomenon illustrated by the novelist through the eponymous character.*

Keywords: *anarchism, revolution, radical, violence, social order.*

Henry James (1843-1916) achieved popularity with the reading public by means of his international theme, which constantly juxtaposed two cultural patterns (the Old World – embodying a feudal civilisation that is beautiful, alluring but corrupt, and the New World – the United States, where individuals are sincere, courageous and open and fully reflect the values and virtues of the new American society). However, when a canonical writer, such as Henry James, gives up his constant preoccupation and allows outside interventions to enter his flights of imagination, the fictional work that would bear the weight of such an interference should not be approached as less important than the classic pattern. The intervention from the outside into the realm of imagination is related, in this particular case, to the socio-political context of the 1880's (the period that is traditionally associated with the 'internationalization' of anarchist terrorist violence), which made Henry James deflect his attention from previous occupations to the political dimensions of human activity. With this in mind, James wrote two novels dealing with the social revolutionaries and reformers of his time, namely *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). The former "remains the fullest and most rounded American social novel of its time" (Grewal, 1990: 5), projected against the background of the feminist movement in New England, whilst the latter deals directly with anarchist terrorism and exposes its author's views on this at a time when England seemed to be "an embattled nation" (James, 2006: 49).

"*The Princess Casamassima* (1886) is often regarded as the most Dickensian or Balzacian of James's novels. It is said to be his 'most sociological novel', the one most turned outward, toward society, the world, the city, rather than being closed upon 'vessels of consciousness' receiving their fine impressions in a kind of social vacuum." (Ginsburg 157).

From a narratological point of view, *The Princess Casamassima* proposes two characters to be followed, and somehow two plots. The first character in question is Hyacinth Robinson, the 'little' hero of the text, as James himself calls him in the Preface. As 'little' as he may be, he does not possess one single theory as far as his identity is concerned, but in fact his evolution through life is governed by the multiplicity of identity narratives he constructs. Hyacinth Robinson is the offspring of

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"a daughter of the wild French people" and (as far as he knows or as far as the people around him assume) of an English aristocrat by the name of Fredrick Purvis. 'Hyacinth' is the name of his mother's father, Florentine Vivier, a man who had died in the July 1830 revolution overthrowing Charles X; his surname, 'Robinson', comes from Lord Fredrick's assumed name in his affair with Florentine. It is from this combined presence of revolution, crime, murder and fictionalization that Hyacinth Robinson draws his (anarchist) essence and his subsequent evolution throughout the pages of the novel.

Before the actual beginning of the novel, Florentine is imprisoned for having stabbed Lord Purvis to death. The novel opens with an incursion of a large woman into a poor London neighbourhood and the subsequent conversation that unfolds between her and one of the inhabitants there, Miss Amanda Pynsent. The discussion takes place in a clean, but rather poor house, and it mainly revolves around a young boy's visit of his imprisoned mother on her deathbed. As the story unfolds, we find out that the little boy was Hyacinth Robinson, who, after his birth, was adopted by Amanda Pynsent (one of his mother's acquaintances) and brought up in that poor environment that the reader visits from the first pages of the novel. That little boy surprisingly grows up to become an adult with a passion and interest in art and aesthetic beauty, a feature that individualizes him and convinces his adoptive mother of the fact that authentic aristocratic blood was flowing through his veins. He even gets a job as a bookbinder, due to his pleasure in reading books and being close to them. The new social position brings him into contact with Eustache Poupin, a French socialist and "an extraordinary Frenchman, an ardent stoic, a cold conspirator" (*TPC*, 1987: 114) who had come to London after the French commune of 1871, to escape the reprisal of the newly-formed government. It is in the Poupins' house that Hyacinth makes the acquaintance of Paul Muniment, the one who initiates Hyacinth in the world of underground politics and decides to make him an *interne* – a member of a secret society that he describes as "just a little movement" (*TPC*, 1987:130).

Hyacinth Robinson is permanently preoccupied with the story of his birth, which he does not disclose to many of the people surrounding him. This is his shameful secret, one that determines his subsequent decisions by making him feel like trapped between two realms: one of superior refinement, which he owes to his father's side of the family, and the other of revolutionary violence, which he takes from his mother's family. It is the combination of these two elements that accounts for his moral quality, his artistic interest in the trade of bookbinding and his contemplation of beauty and art, as well as for the desire to resist and oppose an oppressive system.

At a critical point in his life, and in circumstances that are not revealed to the readers with too many details, the latter of the two elements gains prominence over the former, if only for a short period of time. More impressed by the social question than by aesthetic beauty, Hyacinth joins the world of revolutionary violence and takes a vow of action: he is to assassinate a major political figure when the request is made from the leaders of the anarchist cell. Paradoxically, it is only after this crucial moment in his identity formation that the beauty of the world is finally revealed to him through the generous agency of the Princess Casamassima (herself an adept of revolutionary action) and through a trip he makes to the Old Continent. Hyacinth takes these two 'opportunities' and gets to know some of the intimate mechanisms of the world whose tranquillity he had vowed to destroy when required. Little by little, the young man loses faith in the radical schemes he had once embraced so strongly, yet he feels bound in honour to fulfil his vow. Hence a tragic dilemma arises, to be solved only through the hero's suicidal act. An act of self-sacrifice that, undoubtedly, possesses its own nobility.

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The fact that the novel is populated with women criminals may be understood from its very beginning, which is set in a women's prison. The fundamental figure among these feminine embodiments of rebellious attitude is the eponymous character, i.e. Princess Christina Casamassima. Though, quite surprisingly, she is not present in the first part of the novel (which is devoted to Hyacinth), she is indeed a symbolic character: a revolutionary and a would-be terrorist whose actions are subordinated to the intention to subvert the current social order.

Princess Christina Casamassima is the owner of a hyphenated identity: born of different nationalities (American and Italian), she became a princess by marriage. Actually, just like Hyacinth, she is also a class-passer, an acquired aristocrat that is apparently willing to undermine the social order. Separated from her husband, the Italian Prince Casamassima, the Princess comes to England and declares herself a friend of the people, thus leaving aside her social status superior by title. It is this desire that brings the two characters together, and it is precisely this alliance that will end in Hyacinth's suicide. It seems that Hyacinth and Christina use each other to stabilize their lives: Hyacinth aims at accessing upper class culture, and Christina lower class life. Though claiming to want change, Casamassima in fact initiates Hyacinth into the refinements of the upper class, managing to destabilize the latter's inner self and anarchist impulses.

As the novel evolves, Princess Casamassima follows a trajectory of opinion that is opposite from that of Hyacinth and, at the same time, of the other male revolutionary characters (Paul Muniment etc.) in the book; while the latter become gradually reconciled to the status quo, the Princess's actions become more and more militant as the novel progresses. In a literary work that deals with political radicalism, Christina Casamassima is, in fact, the most militant character: she gives up her wealth in the second half of the book, and, toward the end of the novel, tries to undermine Hyacinth's desire to perform his mission and assassinate the duke.

In spite of her profound revolutionary commitment, though, her male co-conspirators remain suspicious of her desire to "go deep" in the movement. Her attempts to enter and get involved in the radical underworld of the revolutionaries are obstructed mainly because of her gender, the difficulty of getting involved in the revolutionary affairs of the brotherhood being the reason why she meets Hyacinth in the first place. While at the theatre, she calls Hyacinth up to her box with the intention, she says, "to ascertain what really is going on; and for a woman everything of that sort is so difficult" (*TPC,* 1987:197). In spite of her constant attempts, however, the Princess is never really accepted into the inner ranks of the revolutionary movement. After she donates much of her fortune to the cause, Paul Muniment tells her: "I should let you know that I do consider that in giving your money - or, rather, your husband's- to our business you gave the most valuable thing you had to contribute." The Princess exclaims: "This is the day of plain truths! (…) You don't count then any devotion, any intelligence, that I may have placed at your service, even rating my faculties modestly?" Muniment replies: "I count your intelligence, but I don't count your devotion, and one is nothing without the other. You are not trusted at headquarters." "Not trusted! … I thought I could be hanged to-morrow!" "They may let you hang, perfectly, without letting you act. You are liable to be weary of us" (*TPC,* 1987:583).

The Princess's strong wish to get involved and fight for the cause is inhibited by the male revolutionaries, although, ironically, none of these man can act significantly on their own. At one point, inspired by Hyacinth's vow to Hoffendahl, the Princess asks the young man: "Don't they also want, by chance, an obliging young woman?" But

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Hyacinth's reply is very discouraging and at the same time illustrative of the perception on women at the end of the 19th century: "I happen to know [Hoffendahl] doesn't think much of women, my first-rate man. He doesn't trust them" (*TPC,* 1987:307). Therefore, as radical as the revolutionary brotherhood's opinions about politics, government, economy or social class may be, Hyacinth's response suggests that, in their opinion, all these issues have nothing to do with women's interests and, therefore, women's involvement is not considered as meaningful.

The Princess's interest in the revolutionary cause has a personal root, to be found in her strong wish to flee from the patriarchal hegemony of her family; unfortunately, she eventually is forced to deal with the same phenomenon and attitude among the revolutionists she wants to join. Speaking of her marriage to Prince Casamassima, she confesses to Hyacinth:

> "If he could have seen her life, the milieu in which, for several years, she had been condemned to move, the evolution of her opinions (…), would strike him as perfectly logical. She had been humiliated, outraged, tortured; she considered that she too was one of the numerous class who could be put on a tolerable footing only by a revolution. At any rate, she had some self-respect left, and there was still more that she wanted to recover; the only way to arrive at that was to throw herself into some effort which would make her forget her own affairs and comprehend the troubles and efforts of others" (*TPC*, 1987:219).

Moreover, the Princess is equally motivated to enter the ranks of the revolutionaries by the condition of 19th-century women that forced her into an arranged marriage, which she perceives in economic terms: "in the darkest hour of her life she sold herself for a title and a fortune" (*TPC,* 1987:229). The origin of her revolutionary fervour is a deep reservoir of anger against the society in which she "had been married by her people, in a mercenary way, for the sake of a fortune and a title, and it had turned out as badly as her worst enemy could wish. Her parents were dead, luckily for them, and she had no one near her" (*TPC,* 1987:249). The Princess is conscious of her objectification within a marriage that amounted to the status of a mere economic exchange.

From the conversation he has with the Princess, Hyacinth understands that "the force of reaction and revenge might carry her far, make her modern and democratic and heretical" (*TPC,* 1987:220), by this setting a relation between her "personal passions" and "the formation of her views" (*TPC,* 1987: 220). Thus, Princess Casamassima's personal animosity toward the social order of the day can be conceived as originating in the gap between the rich and the poor as well – a gap that seems to have marked her childhood and youth. This fact becomes immediately visible to the reader when the princess talks to Hyacinth about

> her disgust with a thousand social arrangements, her rebellion against the selfishness, the corruption, the iniquity, the cruelty, the imbecility, of the people who, all over Europe, had the upper hand (*TPC,* 1987:218).

Princess Casamassima thus becomes involved in the revolutionary movement largely because she hopes that socialism has the capacity to improve the condition of lower-class individuals and, more specifically, the condition and perception of women. A conversation she has with Paul Muniment is quite illustrative of this:

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> "Don't you consider that the changes you look for will be also for our [women's, *our note*] benefit?
> I don t think they will alter your position.
> If I didn't hope for that, I wouldn't do anything" said the Princess
> Oh, I have no doubt you'll do a great deal" (*TPC,* 1987:493).

Improving women's condition was also a hope of late-Victorian feminists, who believed that socialism had the power to meet feminist goals and enhance women's involvement and participation in society. If the Princess believes or at least hopes that socialism will bring an answer to the woman question, however, the male revolutionaries are much less interested in diminshing this gender gap. During the same conversation reproduced above, at some point Paul Muniment talks of his sister, Rosy, and says, "she will continue to be, like all the most amiable women, just a kind of ornament to life" (*TPC*, 493). Indeed, Muniment does not seem to believe in the existence of a gender gap; when the Princess says, "It's far better, of course, when one is a man," he answers: "I don't know. Women do pretty well what they like" (*TPC*, 1987:441–42).

Disappointed by the failure of her attempts to enter the revolutionary circle, the Princess attempts to build an alliance of her own with another female revolutionist, whom she finds in the person of Lady Aurora Langrish, an aristocratic woman who also wants to level the class system. One of seven unmarried daughters born to a man with a title but little wealth, Lady Aurora describes herself as follows:

> "I do as I like, though it has been rather a struggle. I have my liberty, and that is the greatest blessing in life, except the reputation of being queer, and even a little mad, which is a greater advantage still" (*TPC,* 1987: 221).

Hyacinth admires Lady Aurora and believes she

> "was not a person to spare, wherever she could prick them, the institutions among which she had been brought up and against which she had violently reacted. … she appeared to have been driven to her present excesses by … the conservative influences of that upper-class British home" (*TPC,* 1987: 222).

When Christina Casamassima meets Lady Aurora, the two women immediately connect. Lady Aurora tells Hyacinth: "If I were a man, I should be in love with her. (…) I wonder whether we might work together" (*TPC,* 416), and the Princess is quite interested in finding out as many details as possible about Lady Aurora. At some point, Princess Casamassima says, "Dear lady, we must make a little family together" (*TPC,* 1987:433). The relationship established between the two women is, in fact, an extension of their revolutionary state of mind.

The Princess is willing to make sacrifices for the revolutionary cause, sacrifices that other characters from the novel would not be willing to make. By divesting herself of the wealth inherited, she is the only revolutionist in the novel who actually takes positive action for political change - and it is clear that she is willing to sacrifice much more than money. She is of course much wealthier than most characters in the novel, but other socialists such as Paul and Hyacinth repeatedly say that if they had wealth, they would enjoy it rather than give it away. When Hyacinth receives a small inheritance from Pinnie and Vetch, he promptly sets out on a trip to the Continent,

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where his revolutionary beliefs dissipate and are replaced by passions for "culture," "art," and "civilization." In a letter he writes from Venice to the Princess, he tells her that he now knows exactly where he stands and that he no longer believes in the revolutionary cause to which he has pledged his life. He now understands that the single-minded obsession with the destruction of the higher classes and with the - hypothetical - well-being of the poor also includes the sacrifice of greater values, of the great achievements the human being has been capable of throughout history.

As "the little hero", Hyacinth Robinson, no longer believes in the revolutionary cause, he prefers killing himself to committing the act of violence against the person indicated by his revolutionary brothers. The outcome of the novel makes the reader conclude that the Princess would have been a far more effective assassin than Hyacinth, as she herself is perfectly aware. In this light, it could be stated that, overall, the novel *The Princess Casamassima* insists on the significance of gender in conceptualizing strategies of political intervention.

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