



In 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891) Wilde writes: 'The chief advantage that would diffresult from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others'. James's narrator in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) reports that Captain Sholto is 'amusing himself with everything, including [...] socialism' and Mme Grandoni wryly observes of the Princess that 'at present she is trying democracy and socialism'. In your view, how serious were Wilde AND James about Socialism? Discuss this question in relation to their literary texts (essays and/or novels).

Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891) undeniably engage contentious debates around Socialism. According to Matthew Beaumont, 'debate about post-capitalist society [...] characterised the *fin-de-siècle*'.¹ However, James's characters do not treat Socialism seriously — Socialism is both theatrical and sensationalist to them. However, Hyacinth's involvement is ultimately tragic, and thus, sensationalism is in tension with the underlying tragedy. Wilde is more flippant; he writes of 'Socialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it'.² Additionally, as Josephine M. Guy points out, Frank Harris, editor of *The Fortnightly Review* (where the essay was initially published) stressed 'speed and entertainment', not serious argument.³ This explains the essay's provocations and logical faults. With strict regard to these texts then, I argue James is ambiguously serious about Socialism, and Wilde, blatantly unserious.

According to Lionel Trilling, *The Princess*' prose 'is perfectly in the tradition of the nineteenth-century novel'.⁴ Within this, is theatrical language. As the narrator describes Hyacinth: 'his own character? He was to cover that up to be, every day, and every hour, an actor' (James, 109).⁵ James presents Christina similarly. For instance, Hyacinth waits for Christina with the same feeling 'he had sometimes awaited the entrance of a celebrated actress' (James, 245). Because James also invites readers to reflect on their

¹ Matthew Beaumont, 'Reinterpreting Oscar Wilde's Concept of Utopia: "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"', *Utopian Studies*, 1:15 (2004), 13-29, (p.14).

² Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', in *The Complete Works* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 1174-1197, (p. 1175). All subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in my text thus: (Wilde, X).

³ Josephine M. Guy, "'The Soul of Man Under Socialism": A (con)Textual History', in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 59-85, (p. 65).

⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008), p. 59.

⁵ Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*, ed. by Derek Brewer (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 109. All subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in my text thus: (James, X).

engagement with the novel — ‘the reader will doubtless smile’ or ‘the reader may judge’ — he does not passively present the story. Rather, he ensures readers reflect upon the narrative, and by extension, nineteenth-century fiction. And strikingly, in *The Princess*, sensationalism motivates Hyacinth and Christina both.

Before meeting Christina, ‘what moved [Hyacinth] was simply the prospect of new experience — a sensation’ (James, 182). Madame Grandoni remarks Christina ‘is trying socialism’, and James, in his 1909 preface, that her prime note was ‘an aversion to the banal’ (James, 258, 45). Therefore, Christina is not truly sympathetic to ‘the upward struggles of those below’ if this sympathy also entertains her (James, 200). Because of sensationalist motivations, their relationship is mutually beneficial. When Hyacinth wonders what kind of princess Christina is, this makes his ‘heart beat fast’ (James, 189). For Christina, Hyacinth is a guide to London’s sensational horrors. However, James illustrates Christina’s incongruous motivations, and that she bases them on false suppositions. When Christina tells Hyacinth, ‘I expect you to take me into the very bad places’, the narrator notes, ‘why these scenes of misery should have lighted up her face is more than may be explained’ (James, 253). Ironically, Hyacinth cannot show Christina the ‘worst that London contained’ because he has not experienced it: ‘(he should have, precisely, to make acquaintance with it first), to show her the reality of the horrors’ (James, 401). Thus, James ensures readers mistrust Christina because not only does she sensationalise and perform Socialism, but she also bases this on a falsehood.

The novel reveals that the Socialist reality is, moreover, performative. John Carlos Rowe argues James’s ‘theatricality is a function of that more powerful artist: the social ideology’.⁶ And James describes this socialist scheme as ‘not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances’ (James, 47). Then, vagueness and theatricality permeate every level of representation. Even the ‘incorruptible’ Eustache Poupin James describes as an actor — he had ‘performed in this character now for many years’ (James, 115, 284). Loose appearances aptly describe members of the socialist meeting place, the Sun and Moon. Contrastingly to Hyacinth or Muniment, for instance, other members are non-descript: ‘some one inquired’ or ‘some one else demanded’ (James, 287). Moreover, James’s narrator insults these socialists: ‘the men were advanced radicals, and mostly advanced idiots’, and ‘they hadn’t in their totality grasped any idea at all’ (James, 209, 292). As Rowe argues, ‘the ruling order even invites such powerless radicalism because it knows its “other” to be no threat’.⁷

⁶ John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187

Thus, James's seriousness toward Socialism is ambiguous. On one hand, the narrator condemns Socialism: he presents it as blatantly performative, and therefore, those who believe in it, as asinine. On the other, if theatricality is not simply a function of social ideology and James develops awareness that it functions as such, then he either condemns the ruling order or displays a conservatism: that anarcho-socialists (by also being performative) merely perpetuate the status quo. However, Mildred E. Hartsock argues 'the novel does not belong to the literature of propaganda'.⁸ And I argue further that *The Princess*, ultimately, cautions against propagandist and sensationalist art via Hyacinth's relationships with Hoffendahl and Christina.

Hoffendahl, the revolutionary leader, then represents such ideological propaganda. As Rowe argues, 'Hoffendahl is nothing but the projection of himself into those characters agreeing to serve his fiction'.⁹ Because Hyacinth takes a 'vow of blind obedience' to commit 'an act which would in all probability cost him his life', for Hoffendahl, James demonstrates the dangers of such fiction (James, 333). Additionally, if the narrator is the voice of the status quo, then characters' engagements, either for or against Socialism, are explicitly engagements with ideological fictions. However, fiction, and by extension, art James is undeniably serious about. As Hartsock argues, James is 'committed to the high moral seriousness of the arts'.¹⁰ Because ideological fictions are immoral, insofar as Hyacinth's engagement with them ultimately leads to his death, James does not, therefore, promote or reject Socialism *per se*. Rather, he demonstrates how immoral art (such as Hoffendahl's propaganda) dangerously enacts or devalues ideology.

Hyacinth's renouncement of Socialism is thus significant as it does not deter commitment. As he shouts at Christina, 'it matters little whether one believes or not!' (James, 330). Poupin eventually points out Hyacinth's incongruity: 'you have no right to act for the people when you have ceased to believe in the people' (James, 551). Poupin thus condemns Hyacinth for expressing an awareness of the falsity with which (narratively at least) Socialism presides over them all. Moreover, as Trilling argues, art is 'associated with the ruling classes'.¹¹ Thus, it is significant that Hyacinth's developed artistic temperament — after visiting Paris he felt 'as if hitherto he had lived in a Philistine world' — coincides with his sympathies toward the status quo (James, 382). However, despite eventual disagreement, Christina's performance remains enthralling to Hyacinth. When she shouts 'they must be smashed! the tone in which the Princess

⁸ Mildred E. Hartsock, "'The Princess Casamassima': The Politics of Power", *Studies in the Novel*, 3:1 (1969), 297-309, (p. 305).

⁹ Rowe, p. 174.

¹⁰ Hartsock, p. 307.

¹¹ Trilling, p. 70.

uttered these words made Hyacinth's heart beat fast' (James, 574). And Christina's performance improves: she speaks in a tone 'which would have made the fortune of an actress if an actress could have caught it' (James, 578). Notably, the narrator relays that her performance could be profitable. To extend Rowe's argument then, convincing performances enhance the narrative that Socialism is no threat, which implies Christina's deserves reward from the ruling orders. Thus, Hyacinth fluctuates between genuine socialist sympathy, and enthrallment with performances such as Christina's.

Ultimately, Hyacinth's tragedy is that he sensationalises ideologies — emphasised hitherto by focus on his heart beating fast. Relationships with Christina and Millicent, thus represent Hyacinth's dangerous flirtation with ideologies — 'the Princess wished to destroy society and Millicent wished to uphold it' (James, 542). Millicent, by contrast to Christina, the narrator describes as 'a clever but uncultivated actress' (James, 339). This indicates Hyacinth is attracted, not to ideologies themselves, but how enthralling the performances are. Ultimate rejection by both, however, as Rowe argues, exposes how 'melodramatic appeals to our emotions [align] our affective responses with the cliches of popular culture'.¹² By refusing to consummate these romances then, James displaces melodrama for tragedy and condemns romanticisation of ideologies. By showcasing theatricality and thereby the falsity of Socialism, and yet, Hyacinth's ultimately tragic engagement, I argue James is serious about Socialism. However, indirectly, because rather than explicitly promoting or condemning Socialism, James instead demonstrates an awareness of both how art devalues political seriousness and the dangers that arise from this. Socialism is simply the contemporary debate with which to represent this.

Soul of Man holds none of the seriousness of James's novel, and I argue it is hardly a discussion of Socialism at all. That republication in 1895 omitted the words 'Under Socialism' seems to suggest the latter. For Wilde, Socialism is valuable 'simply because it will lead to Individualism' (Wilde, 1175). Individualist politics, as Guy points out, in the nineteenth-century actively 'opposed socialists', thus, his argument contradicts his title.¹³ In his opening argument, Wilde specifically refutes philanthropic Socialism, because if 'emotions are stirred more quickly than intelligence', altruistic charity is, therefore, unintellectual — his argument is then also insulting. (Wilde, 1174). And by mapping the logic that 'the worst slave-owners were kind', onto philanthropy, Wilde provocatively and paradoxically argues, 'charity creates a multitude of sins' (Wilde, 1174). Matthew Beaumont argues Wilde's introduction rejects the kind of

¹² Rowe, p. 165.

¹³ Guy, p. 70.

Socialism, 'practiced by the Fabians'.¹⁴ And Peter van de Kamp and Patrick Leahy suggest Wilde's Individualism 'is a direct jibe at the Fabians'.¹⁵ Here, therefore, Wilde's argument must be read topically because Wilde rejects specific kinds of Socialism, as opposed to the vague scheme James presents. Moreover, if these provocations are intentionally jibing, Wilde tonally contradicts the essay mode — his argument is not paradoxical out of intellectual display, but to enhance entertainment value. As Guy argues, Wilde recasts familiar positions 'in provocatively witty ways' because the essay is designed to 'attract the magazine buyer', not to propagate Socialism.¹⁶

Additionally, Individualist argument is undeveloped. For instance, Wilde uses scientific and historical rhetoric: 'there is no evolution except toward Individualism', and 'disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue' (Wilde, 1194, 1176). Thus, he presents Individualist development as axiomatic. However, if Individualism is both inevitable and cultivated by rebellion, Wilde's arguments contradict one another, and his argument is illogical. Beaumont comments that Wilde writes 'with the deterministic confidence of a Social Darwinist', and Guy that he uses 'mysterious law[s] of evolution'.¹⁷ Thus, Wilde again rehearses familiar positions, but evokes them as grounds for proof, without development. Wilde is therefore not serious about Socialism, because not only does Individualism argue against it, but also, even this argument is undeveloped. And following discussion veers away from Socialism, toward an artist's anti-authoritarian complaint.

For Wilde, 'the form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all' and his most vehement critique of authority is toward popular culture. (Wilde, 1192). Wilde argues 'the people' are more despotic than monarchs or ecclesiastics because the people 'tyrannise over the soul and body alike', whereas the pope and prince tyrannise only the soul and body respectively (Wilde, 1193). And Wilde's complaints are excessive. For instance:

'they [the people] are continually asking Art to be popular, to please their want of taste, to flatter their absurd vanity to amuse them when they feel heavy after eating too much, and to distract their thoughts when they are wearied of their own stupidity' (Wilde, 1184).

¹⁴ Beaumont, p. 16.

¹⁵ Peter van de Kamp and Patrick Leahy, 'Some Notes on Wilde's Socialism', *The Crane Bag*, 1:7 (1983), 141-150, (p. 146).

¹⁶ Guy, pp. 69, 80.

¹⁷ Beaumont, p. 19; Guy, p. 78.

Wilde's complaint is emphatic and blatantly insulting. James's narrator is tonally similar when he calls radicals advanced idiots. Moreover, this bears an uncanny similarity to Gabriel Nash's critique of 'the brutal modern audience' in James's *The Tragic Muse* (1890).¹⁸ Nash critiques 'the *omnium gatherum* flocking out of hideous hotels gorged with food squeezed together in a sweltering mass', that the dramatist 'has to make the basest concessions' to them.¹⁹

Wilde and James express similar opinions towards contemporary theatregoers, and James extends critique of theatricality into *The Tragic Muse*. Wilde also argues that farce is not a 'higher form of drama', and therefore not a true expression of Individualism — 'Art is Individualism' and its power is that it disturbs 'monotony of type' (Wilde, 1186). In this light, Wilde and James are similar: both reject popular taste. Rowe even aligns James's style with that 'of high modernist experimentation', and thus, *The Princess* disturbs monotony of type in precisely the way Wilde exhorts.²⁰ However, for James, this disturbance cultivates a warning. As James condemns theatricality, he generates awareness of the dangers of Socialist sensationalism and theatricality. Whilst Wilde's sentiment is similar, this argument becomes hypocritical. As Sos Eltis points out, 'Wilde's society plays were undoubtedly a commercial success achieving long runs at the most fashionable theatres'.²¹ Thus, despite condemning popular taste, Wilde goes on to profit from the 'vulgar theatre-going public' (Wilde, 1190). Whereas James uses Socialism to warn against sensationalism, Wilde profits from the sensationalism it arouses. In other words, Wilde's lack of seriousness (and hypocritical profit from this) is precisely that which James cautions in *The Princess*.

Additionally, both Wilde and James write from a position of privilege with respect to the poor. However, as Trilling argues, James represents the poor as 'something more than the pitied objects of our facile sociological minds'.²² Moreover, James refuses to sentimentalise Hyacinth's romance, by underscoring melodrama with brutal tragedy — again disturbing monotony of type. Wilde, however, commends 'a poor man who is rebellious', and condemns the 'virtuous poor' as blameworthy: 'one can pity them' but 'they have made private terms with the enemy' (Wilde, 1176). Moreover, amongst the poor 'there is no grace of manner, or refinement in pleasures', however, it is 'injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure (Wilde, 1175, 1183).

¹⁸ Henry James, *The Tragic Muse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1890), p. 72. Google eBook.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁰ Rowe, p. 160.

²¹ Sos Eltis, 'Reception and Performance History of Wilde's Society Plays', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, eds. Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 319-327, (p. 319).

²² Trilling, p. 87.

Thus, Wilde does not sentimentalise the poor and thereby argues further against philanthropic Socialism. However, his exhortation of pleasure, if taken seriously, engenders egotism and further hypocrisy. Wilde suggests if a labourer were to enjoy sweeping, for instance, 'this would be appalling' (Wilde, 1183). Thus, the individualism Wilde exhorts is biased toward what constitutes pleasure, which garners a problematic and elitist sentiment. And as Guy points out the other definition of individualism, with a small "i", 'was often interpreted as a justification for egotism'.²³

However, Wilde's egotistic endorsement of high art ultimately undermines hitherto anti-authoritarian argument. His assertion that 'art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate art' is contradictory because this positions art as an authority (Wilde, 1190). This he argues against when he condemns popular taste for degrading 'classics into authorities' (Wilde, 1186). And his conclusion, 'Individualism is the new Hellenism', demonstrably exhorts a religion — another form of authority (Wilde, 1197). Van de Kamp and Leahy suggest the essay could betray 'undue influence[s] of such artistic convictions as 'decadence' and '*l'Art pour l'Art*'.²⁴ Wilde's argument is thus ultimately caught in tension between politics and aesthetic art, not dissimilarly to Hyacinth. But, where James tragically resolves the conflict, Wilde compounds upon paradoxical arguments. However, if Wilde's essay is 'an exemplary piece of occasional journalism' as Guy argues, then not only are these paradoxes not serious, but more broadly, *Soul of Man* is not strictly an essay.²⁵ It is topical and entertaining writing around Socialism, and this explains both Wilde's tone and consistently paradoxical arguments. Ultimately, herein lies the larger problems with *Soul of Man*.

As Beaumont argues Wilde writes 'with more wit than most of his contemporaries'.²⁶ And Isobel Murray suggests he offers a 'salutary response to words elsewhere treated with cliched solemnity'.²⁷ However, Wilde's response is not salutary because it only distracts from more serious works, whilst being itself, unserious. Ultimately, James condemns precisely this in *The Princess*: sensationalism fundamentally denies political seriousness. Thus, Wilde's playful and entertaining essay is not dissimilar to Christina's approach to Socialism. And for readers of *Soul of Man*, additionally so.

Wilde's and James's literary responses to debates around Socialism are markedly different. James is wary of its sensationalism, and he demonstrates an awareness of contemporary art's role in enhancing this. However, by not specifically condemning or

²³ Guy, p. 69.

²⁴ van de Kamp and Leahy, p. 145.

²⁵ Guy, p. 79.

²⁶ Beaumont, p. 25.

²⁷ Isobel Murray, 'Oscar Wilde and Individualism: Contexts for "The Soul of Man"', *Durham University Journal*, 52 (1991), 195-207, (p. 200).

promoting Socialism, I argue James instead redirects the debate to foster awareness of the dangers of not treating Socialism seriously. Wilde is demonstrably unserious, and the essay thrives on precisely the sensationalism James is cautious of. *Soul of Man* is even akin to modern-day “clickbait” journalism. This is not to belittle the essay — *Soul of Man* is unserious because it was not written for political action. Its paradoxical arguments, some unrelated to Socialism at all, demonstrate this. Therefore, strictly concerning *The Princess* and *Soul of Man*, James is undeniably (if indirectly) serious about Socialism, whereas Wilde is not.

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