REVOLUTIONIST CONSUMERS: THE APPLICATION OF SACRIFICE IN RUSKIN, BATAILLE AND HENRY JAMES

JESSICA MAYNARD

In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin saw nobility in the redundancy and imperfection of gothic architecture. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille identifies “intimacy” in the surplus, supererogatory aspect of a medieval cathedral. Both see a resistance to values of economic utility in aesthetic productions that have no use, that bring no tangible profit, and that seem to absorb effort and labour unproductively. With reference to Henry James’s novel *The Princess Casamassima*, this essay examines the relationship between Victorian and twentieth-century, as well as continental and Anglo-American, accounts of the role of sacrifice and consumption in challenging capitalist modernity. Using the perspectives provided by Ruskin and Bataille, seemingly very distinct thinkers, but drawing attention to Bataille’s often ignored background in medievalist scholarship, this essay argues that James’s novel blurs a distinction between political and aesthetic experience. Ultimately, it identifies gratuitous expenditure as the only effective riposte to a culture which even threatens to commodify and “consume” political revolution itself.

In March 1886, Henry James took up residence in new rooms in Kensington, West London, describing the place in a letter to his brother as “excellent in every respect... and, in particular, flooded with light like a photographer’s studio.” He went on to praise the panoramic views of the city that the location afforded — “I commune with the unobstructed sky and have an immense bird’s-eye view of housetops and streets” — and to remark that these natural advantages would be improved upon when “little by little I have got more things” (James 1980: 120).¹ On the other hand, writing of Edward Burne-Jones later that year, James confessed to some difficulty in understanding the painter’s way of life, “that is the manner and tenor of his production — a complete studio existence, with doors and windows closed, and no search for impressions outside — no open air, no real daylight and no looking out for it.” Whilst James, in his lofty position, seemed to court the

¹ Letter to William James, 14 February 1886.
world outside, enjoying the removal of protective limits and at least aiming for a total view, Burne-Jones seemed to renounce the real and opt for the enclosure and conservation of the artistic self. His work, James noted, seemed correspondingly “colder and colder — pictured abstractions, less and less observed” (ibid.: 126).

These two letters, it might be said, present opposing forms of artistic economy: the first characterised by an act of forfeiture (giving oneself up, as James might himself have put it, to life itself), the second, by an attitude of reserve or inhibition (refusing to yield up the self, render it vulnerable to external interference); the first spendthrift, the second parsimonious in its attentions. For James, who would reinforce this concern with the nature of artistic receptivity in the Prefaces written for the New York edition of his work (1908/9), there might well be positive gains to be made in the seemingly aimless activity of communing with unobstructed sky or street: “Strangely fertilizing... does a wasted effort of attention often prove. It all depends on how the attention has been cheated, has been squandered.” The acquisition of understanding or truth or reality could be said to rely on this same attitude of uninhibited perceptual generosity which James associated with his outlook over London rooftops in Kensington in 1886.

This, then, is the first form of economy to be dealt with in this essay — a kind of writerly housekeeping, as outlined by James. Abundance of resources and a non-discriminating openness to their influence are the conditions for the emergence of successful art. Overproduction (the impressions, stimuli and experience that threaten to consume the observer) is met not by resistance to but by indulgence in consumption.

A distinction immediately needs to be made, however, between this sacrificial form of consumption, associated with an attitude of selfless dedication, and that secondary order of consumption already alluded to in that letter when James looks forward to filling his room with “things.” James will, in fact, investigate both modes of consumption in his novel The Princess Casamassima, published between 1885 and 1886, setting socialist revolutionary idealism against a kind of cultural Midas touch which threatens to commodify everything: human relationships, love, and even revolution itself: “Don’t you understand that I’m always looking?” asks Captain Sholto, the man who might best be described as the Princess Casamassima’s procurer:

There was a time when I went in immensely for illuminated missals, and another when I collected horrible ghost-stories (she wanted to cultivate a

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2 Letter to Charles Eliot Norton, 6 December 1886.