



## Despotopoulou, Anna. Review of *Spaces of Utopia in the Writings of Henry James*, by Roxana Oltean, Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2005, 219 pp.

Roxana Oltean's *Spaces of Utopia* offers an innovative reading of James's transatlantic preoccupations through discourse informed by postcolonial and globalization studies. Focusing on the international theme of most of James's fictions, she attempts to link current debates on the relation of globalizing pressures and American national culture (as expressed by Thomas Peyser in *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism*, 1998, among others) with James's cosmopolitan projects and instincts. James's interest in travel, which is often seen as an imperial conquest or assimilation, makes him particularly relevant to the contemporary critical exploration of American national identity, which, as John Carlos Rowe has argued, has been shaped by a conflict between a strong imperial desire and a deep anti-colonial disposition (*Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, 2000). Oltean draws heavily on Peyser's account of James's detachment from national cultures as a utopian enterprise in order to examine the "intellectual, moral, emotional, sensual, social, political," in James's words (Preface to vol. XIV of the New York Edition), reverberations of the utopian spaces evoked in his fiction. In this project she deals with the new image of James which has emerged from recent post-structuralist criticism.

In most of the works Oltean looks at (admittedly too few), she reads a conflation of or elimination of difference between Europe and America. In elegant prose she argues persuasively that Europe and America speak of sameness to the American traveller who tends to project his/her New World mentality to the Old World he/she encounters and explores. The space that emerges from this mingling of cultures and attitudes is one of hybridity, a third space, in Bhabha's sense, where purity is impossible. So Paris and New York, for example, are treated as heterotopias, sites of mixed places and themes, the difference between space of origin and that of destination becoming blurred--ambiguous utopias functioning both as elusive dreamlands and as prisons.

In her discussions of "An International Episode" and *The Ambassadors*, which for me are the best parts of the book, Oltean examines the colonial mentality of the American travellers who treat Europe as a seductive Other, an alluring Orient, a fictitious site packed with desirable collectibles. Oltean focuses on the importance of surfaces in settings like Paris, which sometimes hide other surfaces underneath, in order to draw a parallel between the experience of the American hotel, for example, and that of Madame Tussaud's, both of which function as simulacra, blurring the line between authenticity and imitation, depth and surface.

Despite the very evocative readings of these two texts and the interesting concept of "colonial hysteria" developed in relation to *The American*, among other works, I am hesitant to say whether *Spaces of Utopia* fulfils the promise of its introductory pages. Even though the book ends with the very provocative lines, "it is America that answers, in technical, imaginative and cultural terms, James's utopian desires--or borrowing from 'The Great Good Place,' it is America that, ultimately, corresponds to the 'Great Want Met'" (198), I fail to see how this conclusion was reached, especially since the book does not even touch James's principal works about America and American culture, *Hawthorne* and *The American Scene*. The latter has indeed been the focus of attention by many Jamesians in the last decade and more; yet its absence is strongly felt from a book which hopes to make such important claims about James's relevance to contemporary debates on American national identity and culture, a topic which, incidentally, is very indirectly referred to in the course of the book. I believe that James's ambiguous take on New York in *The American Scene*, to offer just one example, could have balanced the argument, which seems to rely mostly on Paris, as well as offered material open to postcolonial and Baudrillardian readings. Moreover, the book suffers from an imbalance



between the introductory remarks and prolonged, unnecessary review of criticism unrelated to the topic, all of which take up half of the book, and the short studies of most of the primary material. In other words, too much time is spent on critical material not necessarily conducive to the argument. More space could have been devoted, for example, to *The Portrait of a Lady*, whose discussion is very brief compared to the elaborate scrutiny of *The Ambassadors*.

Despite these reservations concerning what I found to be a structural imbalance and omissions which are striking considering the strong claims of its conclusion, I did enjoy the application of Bhabha and Baudrillard to James's "imperial" literary projects in a book which, I think, could open the road for future more extensive investigations.

Anna Despotopoulou  
University of Athens