



## Pyrgerou, Maria. Review of *The Function of the Imagination in the Writings of Henry James: The Production of a Civilized Experience*, by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, Edwin Mellen Press, 2007, 261 pp.

In her innovative study Ágnes Zsófia Kovács attempts to trace the function and development of the key term “imagination” within three specific areas of Henry James's writings. Arguing that in James's work the term imagination is an “umbrella term” referring to a) authorial/narratorial imagination, b) the characters' imagination and c) the imagination of the critic, Kovács aims to reconstruct the concept based on Matthew Arnold's philosophical approach and influence on James and on S.T. Coleridge's distinction between “imagination” and “fancy” in order to illustrate James's conceptualization and use of the term. Given the diversity of James's work, the first part of her book analyses the term “imagination” as it is conceptualized by James in his essays on Guy de Maupassant, Hawthorne, the French realists of the nineteenth century, namely Balzac, Flaubert and Daudet and finally the Russian novelist Turgenev whom James considered exemplary because he embodied the happy union of art and morality. This initial account of James's formulation of the concept, based on the novelist's readings and criticism of the afore mentioned writers, as well as an analysis of “The Art of Fiction,” leads to the significant deduction that for James's imagination was, above all, a moral imagination aiming at reproducing an illusion of reality resulting in “a miraculous enlargement of experience” (48). The objective of the novel, then, according to James's theory and Kovács's conclusions, is made up of fine perception on the part of the author, his/her philosophical convictions, his/her reflective imagination and last but not least, the faculty of language which is needed in order to convey the illusion of reality imagination is supposed to reproduce. As the cultural context, according to James, can be limiting to the imagination, the exercise of the full play of the novelist's imagination is of cultural significance and can be accordingly affected. Kovács, here, of course links the use of the term by James with the well-known international theme prevalent in his work. For James, Kovács concludes in this first part, imagination is the quality of the mind which makes the process of experience fine and sensitive, the process which motors the incomplete, insensitive process called experience. Accordingly, the representation of experience by the novelist largely depends on his/her intelligence which is, first and foremost, moral intelligence.

In the second part of the book, Kovács investigates the function of the term “imagination” in six of James's novels belonging in three consecutive phases of his authorial activity. Her aim is to see if/how the imagination, as it is represented in the novels, can be related to the theoretical matrix of contextual understanding of the term drawn, so far, from James's articles analyzed in the first part. Thus, in *The American* (1877) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the two novels of the initial phase, Kovács claims that the absence of imagination on the part of Christopher Newman and Isabel Archer respectively, results in their misconception of social reality and their inability to fit in it. This social reality is of course also a cultural reality as Kovács does not miss the link between experience and cultural context, a recurrent point in James's work. In the novels representing James's middle phase, *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Sacred Fount* (1901), Kovács claims that Maisie and the unknown narrator used their imagination to acquire knowledge of social phenomena or interpersonal relations but in the latter novel the narrator fails to make this knowledge socially intelligible. This is related, according to Kovács, to James's gradual development of complexity in both narrative technique and language since social reality is becoming harder and harder to reproduce. Culminating in the novels of the last phase, namely *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Kovács claims that the development of the heroes in these last novels is a moral development achieved by the protagonists' ability to assume a new moral position as a result of the active use of their imagination via experience. In this respect, according to Kovács, there is a marked development in comparison to the novels of the first phase and those of the middle, both in the use and function of the heroes' imagination and in that of the author/narrator whose representation of social reality is underscored by a development in narrative technique.



In the last part of her book, Kovács delves into the function of imagination in James's culture essays. These include three articles entitled "The Question of our Speech" (1905), "The Speech of American Women" (1906-7) and "The Manners of American Women" (1907). In these articles James explores the national construction of the experiential process relating the term "imagination," or lack of it to a social-national basis determining and defining cultural experience. Also, in the last Jamesian essay analyzed "Is There a Life after Death," Kovács argues that the use of the term "imagination" is relied upon by James in order to counter physical death. This last point proves the relation of imagination to experience, and also our reliance upon imagination as we perceive and experience our illusion of reality.

The conclusions Kovács draws from her meticulous account of the function of the term "imagination" in the diversity of James's writings seem to emphasize the social orientation of Jamesian imagination as well as its experiential and moral aspect. Narratorial imagination instructs the reader's imagination and keeps it in movement. Kovács, then, coins the term "fictionalization" to encompass all the diverse uses of the term by James in the plurality of the work she has analyzed.

Within the Henry James canon Kovács's book presents a fresh and enlightening account of a key term used in varied and multiple ways throughout James's work. Her detailed, thorough study allows us not only to comprehend the use of the term "imagination" in James's writings but also to trace the conceptualization and development of the term in the authorial/narratorial mind. The connection between "imagination" and the cultural context is a significant one given the importance James always placed on the interrelationship between culture and experience. Also, the remarkable interweaving of the concept of imagination with the concomitant concepts of representation, social reality and experience shed light on areas which are often obscure in James. In its fictive and non-fictive function, the term as used by James and as elucidated by Kovács, is of primary importance if we are to understand an author whose representation of reality—or rather its illusion—is complex and inconclusive as it is exciting and engaging. One point missing is perhaps the connection, I believe there is, between Jamesian imagination and Jamesian language as Kovács herself suggests, but does not make, in the first and second parts of the book. Nonetheless, the book is a much-needed addition to our understanding of James's work as well as a very helpful tool for students and scholars interested in a profound study of James's writings from the perspective of the imagination.

Maria Pyrgerou  
University of Athens