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JUDIT BORBÉLY: THE REALITY OF THE UNREAL:
THE CITY AS METAPHOR IN HENRY JAMES
AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

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Cities are sites where the idiosyncrasies of the imaginary encroach upon the reality of architectural fact, the inspired title of Judit Borbély's book suggests. The revised doctoral dissertation examines the iconography of urban architecture in the works of four late Victorian authors, H. G. Wells, George Gissing, Joseph Conrad and Henry James, exploring the multiplicity of meanings that the European city held at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A source and scene of deep-running transformations in human consciousness and subjectivity, the city emerges as the locus and symbol of modern capitalist development. External and internal spaces of London, Paris, Rome and Venice gain significance in the literature of the period as icons of modernity. Drawing on a rich body of literary works as well as autobiographies, letters and essays, Judit Borbély's interdisciplinary approach tackles the reality of the modern city as a complex historical, economic, sociological and even technological problem. She grasps the moment of change in literary expression when the city becomes a functional factor in plot- and character-building.

As the modern metropolis is a technological accomplishment as well as a cultural product, critical focus is directed upon the system of key scenes linked, by new conventions of representation, to a topography of key city sites. The concise, chapter-length analyses of Wells's *Tono Bungay*, Gissing's *New Grub Street*, and Conrad's *The Secret Agent* take the reader on a peripatetic tour of sites and interiors of Victorian London, exploring the cultural relevance of urban development. The physical

proximity of the stylish and the shabby in architecture correlates with the coexistence high and low in society. Revealing, through a display of the material culture of the period, the destitution and squalor of the lower classes, the sham values and valuables of the upwardly mobile, as well as the refinement and moral decadence of those on the top, the authors were searching for the artistic means to cope with late nineteenth-century absorption with, and anxieties about, economic and social progress. It is implied in the argument of the book that the late Victorian, or early modernist writer reflects on a crisis fermenting since the beginning of the nineteenth century, that of the collapse of belief in an ordered universe, one which is paradoxically rendered within the highly ordered generic frame of the realist novel. The novels of Wells and Gissing are read as belonging to the Victorian, “condition of England” type, which apply the socio-Darwinist notion of the “survival of the fittest.” On the other hand, Conrad’s *Secret Agent* is interpreted within the conceptual framework of modernism, as a novel marking a relevant paradigm shift in both object and critical perception.

In the second half of the book Judit Borbély addresses the issue of art and reality in the fiction of Henry James by discussing the iconography of architecture in the author’s favorite London, Paris, Venice and Rome settings. Insightful readings of short stories —“The Siege of London,” “A London Life”—and several novels of his middle and late phases—*The Princess Casamassima*, *The Tragic Muse*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*—take under scrutiny James’s persisting concern with the problem of representation. The study demonstrates how instances of ekphrasis—verbal representations of works of art—gain significance as means of conveying atmosphere and dramatizing character. By exploring the social and psychological aspects of the modern urban experience in a network of references to art, the chapters dedicated to James adequately explain his lasting fascination with the creative possibilities inherent in descriptions of architecture, interiors and personal belongings.

European cities, these icons of imperial power inspired and embodied ideas of progress and civilization. Mapping the contexts and influences affecting the work of the four authors in focus, Judit Borbély gives an overview of the diverging views of Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Macaulay and Matthew Arnold, and also points to Darwinism as a major factor of influence regarding late nineteenth-century concepts of civilization. Her approach is extended, as well, to the impact of sensualism, aestheticism

and the pessimist tradition in philosophy as the possible contexts for the work of Conrad and Gissing are explored. However, the study of Henry James might have paid more attention to the cultural negotiation between England and America. As a pioneering cultural critic, James made repeated attempts to reshape contemporary discourses concerning “culture” and “civilization,” turning American anxieties about their own cultural lack into a positive value. He held the cosmopolitan experience to be the key to independent evaluation and insightful criticism and saw the individual’s capability of absorption as a standard for what he meant by “civilization.” Such a concept of civilization as intellectual activity is implied, although not overtly stated in Judit Borbély’s eye-opening interpretations of what are perhaps the most critically demanding pieces of the Henry James oeuvre.

Lucid argumentation taking pivot in careful close reading, as well as thoroughly researched interdisciplinary links provide valuable additions to what we know about the beginnings of the modern metropolitan experience. Judit Borbély’s guiding tours of the major cities that turn-of-the-century fiction likes to inhabit elucidate the close interdependence of hard architectural fact and the multiplicity of subtle meanings that make up “culture.” Her observations are as appealing as they are critically convincing, thoroughness of contextual investigation and terminological accuracy being the salient qualities of the book.

