

Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture, by Jonathan Freedman. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. 305 pp. ISBN 0-8047-1784-2; \$29.95.

Jonathan Freedman announces that he will be applying a marxist, deconstructive perspective to the milieu of Pater, Wilde, and Henry James. He uses theory to re-evaluate the aesthetes and to judge the sophistication and the sufficiency of theory itself. *Professions of Taste* is a tribute to, and defense of, aestheticism, a literary movement given full credit here for being philosophically complex, self-conscious, and politically astute. Aestheticism, according to Freedman, seems to have anticipated the materialist analysis of marxist theory and to have gone it one better, in terms of a “destabilizing” approach; aware of its own commodity status in late-nineteenth-century culture, it “took up and explored those new social realities. . . [and] thereby volatilized these social facts: at once reflecting them and critiquing them, aestheticism served to put its own professionalization and commodification in perpetual—and perpetually irresolute—play” (xxii). Moreover, the author suggests, aestheticism also appears to have been the seminal force behind the engendering of twentieth-century deconstruction. Referring to Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, Freedman says,

I wonder whether the rapidity with which a deconstructive vocabulary has emerged in the criticism of British aestheticism might not itself be drawn forth by something in that literature itself. . . [and] whether aestheticism itself might not represent a moment within the very tradition of thought from which deconstructive praxis springs,

and to which deconstructive theory then naturally refers. (30)

And, in what may be the most controversial assertion of all, Freedman even credits aestheticism—especially, the “audacious” aesthetic fictions developed by Henry James—with responsibility for the creation of modernism and, by extension, of postmodernist literary stances (xviii).

Freedman admires the works of the aesthetes, particularly those of canonical writers such as Pater and Wilde. His interest in them, moreover, is not confined to generalized descriptions of their place in the construction of theory. Freedman is also an excellent observer of details, and one of the unexpected pleasures of *Professions of Taste* is the proliferation of illuminating close-readings. These include pairings of the ending of Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* with Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the “Conclusion” from Pater’s *Renaissance* with T. S. Eliot’s *East Coker*, and *Dorian Gray* with James’s *The Ambassadors*. The effect at which Freedman aims through such readings is to give aestheticism its due as an innovative literary and philosophical movement by revealing the “complicated intertextual interplay” (193) that links aesthetic, pre-modernist, and modernist texts in England and America.

For Freedman, the central figure embodying and encouraging this connection was Henry James, who is credited here with having adapted the aesthetes’ notions of how to be an artist and having created a modified definition that would be taken up by the High Modernists as their own. The second half of *Professions of Taste* focuses entirely upon a selection of James’s novels, from *Roderick Hudson* through *The*

Golden Bowl. Freedman finds convincing evidence that James was vying with, reacting to, and answering Pater and Wilde at every turn—even at those moments when he appeared most disengaged from aestheticism—and that the next generation of Anglo-American poets and literary critics, at least, followed his lead, though they were vehement in denying such debts to their predecessors.

And yet, sound as Freedman's reasoning here might be, this proves not to be the best part of his argument. Some of the trouble lies with the problem of omission. Although, as Freedman asserts convincingly, the path toward Pound and Eliot may indeed have roots in Pater and Wilde by way of James, that was not the sole path that literary modernism took. Recent studies by feminist cultural historians, such as Ann Ardis's *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990) and Marianne DeKoven's *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (1991), have also established the importance of turn-of-the-century fiction by "New Women" and other radical female thinkers as forces that blazed this trail. But no hint of any "intertextuality" between Pater, Wilde, and James and the novels of these "New Women" is to be found in *Professions of Taste*. The subject of gender receives scant attention in general, except for a brief comparison of James's homoeroticism in *The Ambassadors* with Wilde's in *Dorian Gray*. One would never know from this study that there were such things as female aesthetes, too, or that equally interesting "interplays" could be traced between Pater, Wilde, and James and such contemporaries in poetry and essay writing as "Michael Field" (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Mary F. Robinson, or "Vernon Lee" (Violet Paget). Then again, non-canonical male aesthetes receive short shrift as well, though the voices of Arthur Symonds, Richard Le Gallienne, Lionel Johnson, and other poet-critics of the period certainly helped to shape the aesthetic debate into which Henry James entered.

If Freedman's study grows problematic the nearer it gets to the subject of modernism, it remains very impressive, nevertheless, in the first half of the book, exploring the relations between late-nineteenth-century "commodity culture" and aestheticism, which developed into the first of the "professions of taste." Freedman is alive to the ironies of aestheticism, a movement that enabled its exponents to earn their livelihood through their claims of cultural superiority

over the very public that supported them. At the same time, he also presents sympathetically the plight of the Pre-Raphaelites and the aesthetes, who longed for the impossible—to stand apart from their own culture, to critique it, and to transcend its values—and he defends their unachievable aims. On the subject, for instance, of the fate of William Morris's firm, which priced itself out of the reach of the working classes and became a fad among upper-class consumers, Freedman writes,

This criticism has always struck me as a trifle unfair; Morris can hardly be held accountable for the very phenomena that he himself tried to correct, and the criticism of Morris's enmeshment within that system is too facetiously used as an argument against change itself....(60)

The ubiquity of the process of social reception, of institutionalization, canonization, and commodification guaranteed that the social criticism of Ruskin and Morris could never remain wholly outside the phenomenon they were attacking, that their work and example would be irrevocably transformed into versions of the very commodity form they wished to critique. (63)

Freedman's is a refreshingly balanced point-of-view, according to which there are neither wholly guilty nor wholly guiltless parties. Moreover, he carries the debate over cultural criticism as a paid occupation from the late-Victorian aesthetes down and through to the present, to its current application in the world of the Modern Language Association. As he says somewhat wryly,

To critique the aesthetes for their professionalism. . . smacks to a certain extent of hypocrisy. . . . The indictment of the aesthetes for professionalism, in other words, should not ignore the professional context in which the criticism is made—a context in which, at least in 1989, the critique of professionalism is one of the most respectable means of making one's way in the academic profession itself. (56-57)

That he is not merely willing, but eager, to situate himself amid this analysis and to explore what some might call his own "positionality" is endearing. In the end, Jonathan Freedman's book may be yet another illustration of the wisdom of Wilde's maxim from the

“Preface” to *Dorian Gray*: “The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.” And fortunately, both as a cultural study of aestheticism and as a cultural study of those who undertake such

studies, *Professions of Taste* can take its place among the highest.

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