

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*