

Prof. David Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent

M.A. thesis evaluation

Jan Mackal

Henry James & His Stance Towards Aestheticism and Decadence

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This M.A. thesis focuses on the problematic relationship between Henry James and Aestheticism and Decadence on the example of his two masterpieces—*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). The main task is to document the evolution of this relationship and to point out that despite his lifelong preoccupation with these two artistic movements in his literary works, James refuses to assume a concrete stance toward them. Before the literary analysis of the two abovementioned novels, the author devotes the first chapter to a brief historical survey as to the nature and purpose of the work of art, to the development Aestheticism and Decadence in Europe and Britain, and to James's relationship with some of the proponents of British Aestheticism. The rest of the thesis is devoted to the literary analysis of the two novels through the optics of Aestheticism and Decadence.

Mr. Mackal presents two good detailed analyses as he writes, respectively, about *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*. He is a good reader, has sought out and received good scholarly guidance, and writes with some fluency about the multivalent relationships of the characters in both books. While I have, as any enthusiastic reader of James would, certain quibbles regarding his reading of certain characters, I find that his overall construction of the interrelationships that exist within each book (whether one calls it novel or romance) is competent and convincing. These two chapters are excellent *preuves* of Mr. Mackal's critical and expository abilities.

The problem is the general framework. While James can certainly be read to some extent as operating within the *milieu* of European Aestheticism and Decadence, he simply does not fit so neatly nor so comprehensively into that set of problematizations as Mr. Mackal, it seems, would have us accept. However European a writer James was, he was also a very American one, and his father saw to it that, wherever Henry and his elder brother William traveled extensively outside the U.S., they were immersed in a profoundly Emersonian environment full of specifically American problematizations. While some of these overlapped with European Romanticism and Aestheticism, they threw a specifically American shadow on most of the James brothers' thinking, and on all of their work. Emerson was far more than a Transcendentalist, but even Transcendentalism concerned itself with a number of issues that cast its net into pools well outside the general purview of European Aestheticism. These issues included those of democracy and what Walt Whitman called "aesthetic democracy" (the equal validity of all creators and creations), as well as the related (and in James's case central) issue of the capacities of women. There were many other, more or less nuanced, differences in construction between the American version and offshoots of Romanticism and their European cousins, and to understand and convincingly to encompass Henry James, one has to be aware of his Americanness at least as much as one is aware of his Europeanness. I find almost nothing of this in Mr. Mackal's broader analysis of the Jamesian works he discusses. In this regard, I think even a cursory introduction to the deep and broad relationship of the Jameses to Emerson from works by such important American Studies scholars as Richard Poirier and

Robert Richardson would have been helpful here. But I find no mention of either, even in the bibliography.

I appreciate and honor Mr. Mackal's attempt here, but with all the good will in the world, the significant *lacunae* that exist in his narrative as regards the complicated relationship of Henry James, and of European Aestheticism, to contemporary American intellectual and cultural streams lead me to conclude that this thesis merits an evaluation of between a "1.5" and a "2," depending on how much credit one wants to give the author for the good detail work done in the book-specific chapters.

Thesis evaluation: Between "1.5" and "2, velmi dobre."

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at drobbins22@netzero.net.