

Supervisor's Report on M.A. Thesis by

Jan Mackal

"Henry James & His Stance Towards Aestheticism and Decadence."

Mr. Jan Mackal purveys in his thesis work the American writer Henry James's relation to aestheticism and decadence. The thesis contains 84 pp. across some preliminary matter, five chapters, and a bibliography. As for the prose style, it reads well and displays an ability too to retain his own critical trajectory and program amidst the body of criticism that he does engage. More exactly, the quality of the language while very good does lack some definite and indefinite articles in the prose, e.g., "in [the] case of Wilde" p. 26, "in [the] case of Wilde" p. 27), "[a] total fiasco" p. 30; there are a few more glitches as well to boot. E.g.: "Among other, Gautier writes that" (13) or proper names "Richard Ellman[n]" (30) and "The point James wanted [to make]" (35). Also there is an error of a date where on p. 57 it should not be "1917" but "1916".

Content-wise, this reader appreciated the rigorous use of close reading of the target cultural objects, the two novels *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, a critical strategy linked up with a band of illuminating critical texts and a good historical perspective on James's engagement with aestheticism and decadence. For example, there is a fine discussion on the threat that Oscar Wilde's conceptual persona held for James, and also to the problem of the early-style James novel *Roderick Hudson* in its encounter with aestheticism and decadence.

The candidate also well characterizes the fraught nature of defining the very categories of aestheticism and decadence as cultural movements and phenomena. What is more, the candidate argues for James's ambiguous ideological attitude towards these two cultural dynamics. I would ask the candidate to elaborate a bit more on the content of this ambiguity of James's as can be seen in the modes of reality of a select band of characters, informed precisely by certain reifying and instrumentalizing strategies to be found in aestheticism and decadence, who populate *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*; the thesis nicely delineates these aforementioned tendencies, but what overall function does this serve? Is there a kind of moral or ethical position-taking in not taking sides on such a problem for James? How so? Or how not so? By not choosing sides, does James point out other contours or problems to the challenge of adjudicating on the merit and demerits of aestheticism and decadence as cultural phenomena? Also, does your critical analysis suggest if not offer ways out of the deadlocks and ambiguities regarding James's angle of vision toward aestheticism and decadence?

In light of the foregoing mentions, I hereby recommend the pre thesis defense mark of between a 2 (velmi dobře) and a 1 (výborně) for the thesis work.

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