

PJC BOOK REVIEW 11

**James Noggle, *The Temporality of Taste*
in Eighteenth-Century British Writing
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although the message is unchanged.*

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This book is scrupulous, informative, and well-focused upon its brief. It should be read by all literary scholars who are interested in Georgian British writings on the aesthetics of taste. At the same time, James Noggle seems to be writing for fellow experts, making it hard for a colleague in an adjacent discipline to review. However, since I am a historian of Time and interested in the core theme, here follows an account both of the insights gleaned and the problems encountered upon reading *The Temporality of Taste*.

First: the insights. Sandwiched between a thematic introduction and a short epilogue, there are informative chapters on Pope (inevitably); the landscape gardens at Stowe in Buckinghamshire (for me, the best chapter); Hume; three women's texts from the 1770s; Adam Smith and the Reynoldses (a somewhat strained conjunction); and William Beckford as a paradigmatic consumer-collector (a suitably feverish chapter).

The overall argument is teased out by a close reading of eighteenth-century

texts, cross-cut with theories from later literary and sociological analyses of the theme. Noggle places himself firmly alongside those who maintain that individual taste cannot be reduced to a 'mere' outcrop of class, gender, or other identities. While there are always some blind followers of fashion, there are others with their own views. Aesthetic appreciation is both personal and socially mediated. Here is the duality within the temporality of taste that Noggle is keen to stress. We are individuals but we are often less original and more influenced by prevailing assumptions than we think. So something that is sincerely admired as elegant taste in one era (such as wearing real fur) may well be sincerely deplored by many, if not by all, a few generations later.

Secondly: after the insights, the problems. The book offers a highly detailed analysis but, for a historian, not enough of a sense of change/continuity over time. When confronted with relentless in-depth close focus, the reader begins to yearn for a wide perspective.

Furthermore, when Noggle does offer some broader views, these are often based upon bald statements from cultural theorists. For example, when considering William Beckford as a perennially dissatisfied collector, readers are informed (p. 184), courtesy of Slavoj Žižek, that 'desire is grounded in its constituted lack, while drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being ...'. That delphic observation seems to mean that people want things that they haven't got, and that such desires/ drives provide crucial motor forces for consumer capitalism.

Yet there is no assessment from Noggle as to whether Žižek's dictum is either true or analytically helpful. It certainly does little either to illuminate Beckford's personal motivations as a collector, or to explain how cultural understandings of good taste are formed/ shared/ sustained/ or changed. Similarly, Noggle's invocations of fuzzy concepts such as 'modernity' and 'capitalism' call out for further critique and analysis. Otherwise, the arguments risk becoming circular. Capitalist desires fuel taste under capitalism, while

capitalism fuels capitalist desires and drives.

However, it's positive and pleasant to end with a sly joke from a poem entitled *The Woman of Taste* (1733), which is one of many relevant writings cited by Noggle. It bears directly upon the question of social influence upon personal responses. The poem's anonymous author urged that the smart thing was to seem authentic but in reality to follow the *cognoscenti* (p. 29). Hence the *Woman of Taste*, when going to the opera, should temper her emotions to the temporality:

But ah! beware, lest list'ning to the song,
Your transport, or your sorrow, shou'd be wrong.
When you shou'd smile or sob, shou'd laugh or cry,
The hint still taking from the neighbour's eye ...

The scenario is well observed by the poet; and highly pertinent to the argument of this informative study.