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Erec R. Koch, *The Aesthetic Body: Passion, Sensibility, and Corporeality in Seventeenth-Century France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 390 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-87413-010-2.

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Erec Koch's ambitious and persuasive study of the "aesthetic body" in early modern France challenges us to rethink the meaning of the Cartesian revolution at the start of what we commonly call "the Age of Reason." Descartes' pursuit of a thoroughly mathematical understanding of the universe, the *mathesis universalis*, coupled with his trademark mind/body dualism, the radical distinction he made between the mind as guide in the search for truth and the body as exterior (if not antithetical) to certain knowledge--this familiar and certainly incomplete image of Descartes has contributed to a singularly *disembodied* view of learned discourse in the seventeenth century. In fact, Koch cites as an ally in his corrective project Daniel Garber, whose 2001 study directly announces a similar goal in its title: *Descartes Embodied*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Koch starts from the *Passions de l'âme* (1649; also known as the *Traité des passions*) as the neglected source of a very developed reflection on the interactions between body and soul; in this treatise that was the culmination of Descartes' life's work in philosophy and science, "we discover the representative construction of the aesthetic body, of the body as source and site of the passions and of sensibility" (p. 85). Indeed, to appreciate this apparent paradox, one need only consider a moment the *esprits animaux*, the name for the hybrid fuel that sets in motion this *aesthetic body*, a complex of reactive forces passing through a system of conduits that might today be imagined as the mechanized world of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, and which Koch describes as a kind of "tea-kettle" (p. 13).<sup>[2]</sup> The point is not the anatomical correctness of this schematic model, which Koch describes in great detail in chapter one, "Physiology: Corporeality and Descartes' (Aesth) Ethics," but rather its break from the Aristotelian past and its influence on the imagination of thinkers and writers of the age. Sense comes not only from the mind but, naturally enough, through the senses. Still, Koch's goal is not to repaint the intellectual history of the age in empiricist tones but instead to flesh out the obscure corporeal edges of rational *clarté*.

The opening chapter offers a patient, close-to-the-vest reading of the *Passions de l'âme* as a backdrop for *The Aesthetic Body* and, in so doing, does not attempt to break any new ground. Koch asks us to consider the Cartesian body not as an automaton--the common view--but as a reactive organism whose most compelling role is to function as, "the source and, frequently, the site, of passion" (p. 13). It is not entirely clear to me how hidden this truth is in Descartes' text and its posterity, given the philosopher's stated intention to inject physiology and anatomy into the discussion of ethics. The breakdown of the mind-body split in the last chapter of his philosophical career will surely come as a surprise to the many readers for whom Descartes is first and last the author of the *Méditations métaphysiques*, so Koch's reframing of Cartesianism around the *Passions* (and the passions) is both accurate and potentially revelatory.<sup>[3]</sup>

The remaining four chapters of the book focus on the senses of "Sight" (chapter two), "Hearing" (chapter three), "Taste" (chapter four), and "Touch" (chapter five). (Koch explains, "I have occulted the fifth sense,

smell, which at the time was considered to be simply a variant of the sensory contact that determined taste" [p. 14].) The immediate appeal of this structure is great, but it may short circuit somewhat a distinction that Descartes makes in Article 29 of the *Passions*: "J'ajoute qu'elles [les passions] se rapportent particulièrement à l'âme, pour les distinguer des autres sentiments qu'on rapporte, les uns aux objets extérieurs, comme les odeurs, les sons, les couleurs ; les autres à notre corps, comme la faim, la soif, la douleur,"[4] after which he asserts, in the title of the following article, "Art. 30. *Que l'âme est unie à toutes les parties du corps conjointement.*"[5] The hybridity or "chiasmatic" nature of the passions is thus absolutely central to Descartes' account and not an unintended consequence. One might have considered, then, taking up "Emotional Sight" or "Moving Sound," and so on, with the obvious loss of simplicity and clarity in the naming of chapter topics. In another respect, the strength of this book's demonstration must, then, be seen less as a discovery of the fundamental *mixité* of the *Passions de l'âme*, already definitive in Descartes' approach, than on the extensive accounting of the complexity in their attendant influences or interactions: body on mind, science on the arts, philosophers on rhetors and on social commentators —and, many times, exchanges in the reverse direction.

The approach in chapters two through five does not follow a single model or scholarly perspective: "Sight" and "Hearing" focus on the role played by sensorial input as a "supplement" to discursive, rhetorical argument and representation (in Corneille's *Cinna*, then in contemporary music theory and "arts" of rhetoric), whereas "Taste" addresses explicitly theoretical discourse on aesthetic taste found in celebrated *mondain* texts like Méré's "De l'honnêteté" and Bouhours's *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* where the definition of taste is taken up directly. In this chapter, then, Koch is no longer bringing mechanistic science to bear on the aesthetics of seeing a play or hearing an oration but he is rather bringing the figurative and literal analysis of taste back to the insights provided by the psychophysiology of tasting. The point, particularly in the chapter on taste, is that the intellectual processes that link understanding and sensation are dialectical and gloriously unstable, especially as they operate back and forth between the literal and the figurative. This indeterminacy, together with the frequent recourse to the Derridean or post-modern notion of the corporeal as an indispensable supplement to the rational, constitutes the ideological vector of Koch's new history of classical sensibility.

The most successful chapter, in my opinion, is the final one on "Touch," because of the larger issues that it considers: irresistible, ferocious force and impure justice in a secular "post-lapsarian" world dominated by the body rather than the soul. This discussion also serves, by the way, as a good conclusion to this book that includes no formal conclusion. In this chapter, Koch seems to be treating 'touch' in the Democritean manner as the concentrate of all the senses: "Democritus maintained that all sensation is the product of material impact of atoms on the body, hence the reduction of sight, smell, taste, and hearing to species of tactile impact" (p. 352, n. 62). Similarly, Koch places Hobbes's *Leviathan* (conceived in Paris, though born in London) at the center of his chapter, giving pride of place to the opening lines of Hobbes's introduction: in Koch's paraphrase, "All life is motion" (p. 260) [6] and to Hobbes' Democritean credo near the beginning of I.1: "sense in all cases is nothing else but original fancy caused (as I have said) by the pressure that is, by the motion of external things upon our eyes, ears, and other organs, thereunto ordained." [7] The violent collision of bodies in chaotic motion produces, over time, aversion and the passion of fear. This passion, in turn, is the driving force of civil societies to organize in order to soften the percussive violence that is the essence of their natural state. The demonstration of this force as passion, as power, and physics also constitutes the central thrust and unifying principle of Koch's final chapter where the following idea is asserted and frequently restated, e.g., "That [aesthetic] body situated in society is motivated by the force of contact-touch, which provokes sensibility and passion, and most notably the passion of fear" (p. 288).

The Hobbesian *Leviathan* is book-ended in the final chapter with Jansenist versions of this physics of fear and loathing, first in Pierre Nicole's *Essai de morale*, "De la charité et de l'amour-propre" (1675) and then in several texts by Pascal. Koch shows nicely how Nicole constructs his vision of the social order as a metaphorical system of vortices (or *tourbillons*) like the ones Descartes describes in his physics. The

closing pages on Pascal reveal Koch's familiarity with the author of the *Pensées* and also satisfying insights on the possible *idées de derrière* that help explain the paradoxical unity of Pascal's work in the physical sciences, his rigorous Augustinianism, and his harsh, Hobbesian social realism.[8] The three parts of this chapter fit well together and provide the most compelling examples of the passionate *homme-machine* as a *clef de lecture* for learned discourse in seventeenth-century France.

In all, then, Koch achieves his aims quite admirably. My only real criticism of the study concerns the book's own sometimes over-heated expression. The prose style adopted often seems unnecessarily dense, as with its predilection for rare or gallicized turns of phrase. But this is rather minor when compared to the rich reflection and massive research that should certainly reward the readers of this book, whether they are intellectual historians wishing to pursue divergent approaches to Cartesianism or cultural historians following the influence of the New Science on learned society and discourse in Classical France. This book will certainly occupy a central position in the newly thriving trans-Atlantic inquiry into *mondain* and clerical revisions of humanism in the early-modern period.

## NOTES

[1] Daniel Garber, *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy Through Cartesian Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[2] The lexical crossover touches not only the phrase but also its elements: *esprits* evokes both the spiritual and the physical (cf. the English 'mineral spirits'); *animaux*, both the animalist automaton that is man and the Aristotelian *anima*, or metaphysical force, that animates the universe. See Koch's observation on Kepler's *vis* which replaced *anima*, a modification that the author calls "the emblem of the New Science in the seventeenth century" (p. 351, n. 34). Descartes makes a version of this point in Article Five and Sixteen of the *Passions* entitled "*Que c'est erreur de croire que l'âme donne le mouvement et la chaleur au corps*" and "*Comment tous les membres peuvent être mus par les objets des sens et par les esprits sans l'aide de l'âme*" René Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme* [1649], précédée de "*La Pathétique cartésienne*" par Jean-Maurice Monnoyer. (Paris: Gallimard. 1988), pp. 157, 165.

[3] A minor quibble: the author uses a very cumbersome parenthetical apparatus for citing Cartesian texts, e.g. this reference to the *Passions* on p. 68: "(In *OP*, vol. 3 [1973], art. 136, 1050-51; in *Œ*, vol. 11 [1909], 428-29)" referring to Alquié's *Œuvres philosophiques* and Adam and Tannery's *Œuvres*. Many more economical abbreviations could have been adopted, saving the reader some ocular acrobatics; and it is puzzling to find full citation of both French editions without reference to the Cottingham (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vol., (New York: Cambridge, 1984-91)) or other existing English translations -- though all French text is followed by English translations (presumably the author's own). It is true that Cottingham includes running marginal pagination from the Adam and Tannery edition (or "AT") for all but the correspondence -- but then so does Alquié, even for the correspondence. So the conventional notation "(AT XI, 428-9)" might have been a better, less burdensome alternative.

[4] *Passions de l'âme*, pp. 172-3.

[5] *Passions de l'âme*, pp. 173.

[6] Hobbes' observation is not primarily physical but bears more broadly on the analogical relationship between Nature and the State, which Hobbes calls an "artificial" man: "Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. For seeing life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within, why may we not say that all automata (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the heart, but a spring; and the

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nerves, but so many strings; and the joints, but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the Artificer?" Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651]: *with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*. Edited, with introduction and notes, by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1994), p. 1.

[7] *Leviathan*, p. 7.

[8] See Koch's *Pascal and Rhetoric: Figural and Persuasive Language in the Scientific Treatises, the Provinciales, and the Pensées* (Charlottesville, Va.: Rookwood Press, 1997).

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