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Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightened Pleasures: Eighteenth-Century France and the New Epicurianism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. 254 pp. Notes, illustration credits, and index. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-14094-1.

Review by Downing A. Thomas, The University of Iowa.

Thomas Kavanagh's latest book is a delightful exploration of the French eighteenth-century's relationship to, and reflection on, pleasure. Because pleasure as Kavanagh understands it is necessarily of the moment, *Enlightened Pleasures* is an excellent sequel to his *Aesthetics of the Moment*, where some of the same authors and works are examined. [1] A study in eight chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion, Kavanagh's *Enlightened Pleasures* draws together a combination of familiar and less-well-known works, primarily literary but also philosophical or aesthetic writings and paintings. The difficult-to-follow *Guerrier philosophe* (1744) by Jean-Baptiste Jourdain is the focus of chapter one, to give an example of the less-well-known works Kavanagh examines. Kavanagh's interdisciplinarity comes out in his reading of François Boucher's paintings through the lens of Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's aesthetics in chapter four. And his interest in the cultural practices associated with theater and performance occupies center stage in his final chapter, where he explores the vaudevilles, sketches, and *parades* that make up what he calls the "theaters of pleasure." These chapters and the others provide refreshing juxtapositions of works and perspectives. Kavanagh is a master of language; and his book is exemplary in its clarity and accessibility, which doesn't prevent him from being at times dazzling and idiosyncratic (certainly evident in the virtuosic reading of Rousseau with and against Boucher towards the end of chapter five). One could describe the book as smart, yet light in tone, leavened by occasional moments of humor, as when he christens the repertory of a sub-genre of late-eighteenth-century erotic theater "the impotence plays" (p. 201).

The premise of the *Enlightened Pleasures* is at first blush a rather unlikely one: that Epicureanism and Stoicism found new life together during a relatively brief mid-century idyll spanning the 1740s and 1750s. Kavanagh admits that the term "Epicurean Stoicism" is of his invention, and that rarely do the terms meet in eighteenth-century texts (p. 5). This lack of linguistic grounding might prove problematic for the literary critic. The one instance of eighteenth-century linguistic evidence that Kavanagh cites, from Diderot, is not the best support for his argument: "we becomes Stoics, but we are born Epicureans." While Stoicism and Epicureanism may indeed be "different points on a shared continuum" in this formulation, I am not convinced that Diderot effectuates a "reconciliation" of the two in the passage cited, as Kavanagh claims (p. 5).

As a framing device, the two -isms nonetheless work remarkably well in allowing Kavanagh to make a case for the French Enlightenment as a period in which pleasures were relished but also refined and explored through the use of reason. They also provide a highly useful alternative to the term *libertinage*, which is certainly more familiar but which Kavanagh rightly considers potentially limiting because of its exclusive focus on sexual pleasures. In situating his place within literary criticism, Kavanagh distinguishes his treatment of the eighteenth century from that of influential approaches to the Enlightenment, in particular that of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and

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Cassirer's *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (1932). His argument for rejecting these approaches is based on the undue ideological burden the eighteenth century is made to bear in these texts, highly colored as they are with the contemporary need for a response to the rise of fascism and of the Holocaust.

The later decades of the eighteenth century clearly represent for Kavanagh a fall from the pleasure-centered middle decades, though he does highlight notable exceptions to the rule such as Mirabeau's (André Boniface Riqueti, not the famous Honoré Gabriel) *La Morale des sens*. The twin ills to which pleasure succumbed in the late Enlightenment are the sentimentalism that abjured Epicurean sensibilities and the imposition of civic virtues that flattened pleasure into the one-dimensional adherence to an ideological mandate. For this reason, at times, Kavanagh's characterizations of the pleasure years appear utopian in cast. The decades of the 1740s and 1750s, the literary productions and the attitudes of this period, clearly appeal to Kavanagh; and this appeal just as clearly results in a book that conveys the interest and pleasure which these works can afford the modern reader, "deliciously closing the gap between readers and what they read," as he so aptly characterizes the objective of La Morlière's *Angola* (p. 36).

While the approaches of earlier commentators such as Gay or Adorno are openly criticized, current polemics are almost entirely avoided. Kavanagh makes note of extremely different approaches to the texts he examines, indeed ones he presumably rejects; yet, these approaches are mentioned only in notes and without any engagement of the matters at hand. Reading a passage in *Thérèse philosophe* in which the abbé compares the relief of his sexual needs to the relief he feels when he urinates, for example, Kavanagh suggests that the author underscores the absurdity of "religious and social prohibitions placed on sexual pleasure" (p. 59). In a footnote, he cites Natania Meeker's reading of the same passage as misogynist (p. 226).<sup>[2]</sup> Yet there is no attempt to explore further the apparent discrepancy between Kavanagh's reading and Meeker's. Does Kavanagh not feel Meeker's interpretation worth considering further, either because it represents a hackneyed perspective, or because it is simply *hors de son propos*? Are the two readings inconsistent, or on the contrary are they divergent but compatible with each other? While one might find reason to laud Kavanagh's generously ecumenical tone, if that is what it is, the lack of further discussion is unsettling.

One of the stand-out moments of Kavanagh's study is chapter seven, focused on Mirabeau's *La Morale des sens*. What makes this work so interesting is that, coming as it does after Rousseau's sentimental recasting of pleasure, it at first appears to be a one-dimensional throw-back to the earlier "carefree" days of La Morlière and Boucher. Mirabeau's deliberately flat narrative (his diffuse character and plot development) reduces his characters' adventures to "pure sensorial." Revealing the lack of guaranteed referent or verifiability in Rousseau's language of sentimentalism, he shows up sentimentalism as a mere "convention, a jargon, a snare," (pp. 153-54). Mirabeau's is a belated instance of Epicureanism in the midst of the triumph of sentimentalism.

Another is chapter eight, with its rich contribution to our understanding of theatrical treatments of pleasure. Kavanagh overturns the condemnation many critics heap upon late-eighteenth-century erotic theater as unworthy of the Enlightenment. He underscores the richness of the repertory and the intriguing blurring that it effectuates between public and private, actor and spectator, and actor and prostitute. He provides examples of the ways in which this theater turns on its head the conventions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theater while at the same time using the plot devices of these previous models. Kavanagh claims that this playfulness comes to a close at the end of the century. Saint-Just and Sade appear for a few pages in the conclusion as indicative of the dismantling of an earlier "ethics of pleasure" with their focus, albeit distinct one from the other, on civic duty (p. 211).

As pure chance would have it, I happened to read *Enlightened Pleasures* at the same time as Michel Houellebecq's new novel, *La Carte et le territoire*, which was published this past fall.<sup>[3]</sup> The

juxtaposition of attitudes toward pleasure couldn't be greater. Among other things, *La Carte et le territoire* is a well-written, clever, and disheartening condemnation of an era in which our pleasures exist only through the mediated forms of advertizing and commodities, the alternative to this fate being Houellebecq's (Michel Houellebecq is a character in the novel) pitiful retreat from the world in bottle after bottle of Chilean wine and in a form of self-imposed house arrest. In passing, Houellebecq's novel also touches on the relationship between liberty and pleasure. Kavanagh's chapter on Rousseau explains that "if we speak readily of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of *happiness*'—but only grotesquely of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of *pleasure*'—it is because the very notion of pleasure assumes a self-enclosure separating it from the collective servitude that always lies behind the articulation of liberty" (pp. 107-08). With this insight, Kavanagh decisively points to what separates the decades of the eighteenth-century that he explores in the present study from what we have inherited from and made of Rousseau.

From Du Bos's path-breaking shift from the work in itself to the effects works have readers or spectators, to Angola's and Zobéide's "merry-go-round of pleasures" in La Morlière's text, Kavanagh's study underscores the pleasures of reading and the reading of pleasure for this crucial period in eighteenth-century France, where the central message "is the grounding of consciousness within the reality of the body and its pleasures" (pp. 39, 70).

#### NOTES

[1] Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Aesthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

[2] Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment* (Fordham, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 2006).

[3] Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

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