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**Michael E. Winston**, *From Perfectibility to Perversion: Meliorism in Eighteenth-Century France*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. xii + 184 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$64.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-8204-7495-9.

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The idea of progress in the eighteenth century—linked to notions of optimism, reason, and modernity—once held claim as a normative facet of Enlightenment thought. Old regime society had not achieved an enlightened state yet, but it was certainly moving in the right direction and would, eventually, fulfill its destiny as long as humanity kept on the proper path. Classic studies of progress, like J. R. Bury's *The Idea of Progress*, offered intellectual surveys of this concept with appropriate gestures to *philosophes* such as Condorcet and others who had posited the future fulfillment of mankind's potential.[1] More recently, scholars have questioned the hold progress had over eighteenth-century thinkers and have placed renewed emphasis on historical pessimism and on eighteenth-century beliefs in the biological inability of humans to maintain a state of happiness. In addition, analyses of figures like Jean-Jacques Rousseau have revealed the disparity that existed between the belief in progress and perfectibility and the degeneration of values in civil society.[2]

Michael E. Winston enters into this ongoing discourse on progress with his monograph, *From Perfectibility to Perversion: Meliorism in Eighteenth-Century France*. This is a literary analysis of perfectibility discourse in the second half of the eighteenth century, with a particular emphasis on philosophical and medical writings. Winston does not attempt an overall survey of this topic, but instead chooses to discuss key participants in the debate on the possibility of human progress. His goal is to "examine perfectibility discourse in French Enlightenment-era medicine, its cultural impact, as well as its development in a variety of other domains, including philosophy and anthropology" (p. ix).

Winston begins with an introduction that fulfills two tasks. First, he briefly, perhaps too briefly, engages with some of the secondary scholarship that informs his study. Scholars who specialize in eighteenth-century literature and history inform much of Winston's book, but he also gestures to works that explore the idea of progress and, more specifically, eugenics, in the modern period. Second, Winston offers a somewhat lengthy summary of the seven chapters that follow. Winston then turns, in the first substantive chapter, to a discussion of the conceptual limits on the "meliorist discourses." He accomplishes this through an analysis of works by Claude-Adrien Helvétius and Julien Offray de La Mettrie. Rather than explore all of the many models of progress, Winston establishes what he considers to be the poles of the debate. Helvétius, on the one hand, represents the idea that humans, and by default society, were indefinitely able to improve while La Mettrie, on the other hand, stands for a "fixist" view of people who have inbred limitations on their ability to develop.

Winston uses this perfectibility spectrum as a road map for the rest of the book. Thus, in the second chapter Winston turns to an analysis of two competing views of humanity and social progress within the realm of philosophical anthropology. Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon argues for human perfectibility and the progress of civilization whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau links the development of humans with the ultimate decline of society. Buffon's concept of progress then becomes the basis of the third chapter, where Winston turns to examine more explicitly the works of medical writers and other theorists who stress biological factors in the development of human society. In particular, Winston explores the works of physicians, such as Charles Augustin Vandermonde, Antoine Le Camus and Pierre Fabre, alongside the work of Denis Diderot. Winston mainly describes the development of medical

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models of perfectibility, with a particular focus on Vandermonde and Diderot. These authors discuss factors such as medical hygiene, nutrition, and sexual behavior (especially the choice of sexual partner) and the possibility of moral and social regeneration. Winston follows this with a discussion of some of the limitations inherent in these models.

One such limitation recognized during the eighteenth century was based on sexual difference. Chapter four, therefore, turns to an examination of the woman question and the idea of sexual incommensurability. Winston explores Rousseau's ideas regarding the place of women in society alongside Pierre Roussel's physiological account. Roussel argues that women's inferior place in society is a natural result of their medical status. After analyzing the place of women in perfectibility discourse, Winston turns to an analysis of men in chapter five. Here, Winston continues his discussion of Roussel but adds to it a discussion of Samuel-Auguste-André-David Tissot's *L'Onanisme*, among others. In this chapter Winston again sets up a binary analysis, with Roussel providing the example of how men should live and Tissot the example of what happens to humanity and society when men violate the natural order.

The next chapter brings Winston's argument to the era of the French Revolution and beyond. Winston traces the development of ideas about perfectibility in the works of a number of authors here including Jean-Antoine Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet, Rousseau, and Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis. Here Winston is especially clear in contextualizing his thesis, albeit briefly, within the general discourse on regeneration during the revolutionary period. The last chapter explores essentially the same time period but focuses on the "perversion" of the book's title. Political pornography and the writings of Révéroni Saint-Cyr and the Marquis de Sade provide the focus. These works explore the limits of the human body but turn away from an emphasis on overall social progress to one of self interest. In mocking the very idea of progress, Winston argues, Sade turns perfectibility away from a social issue to one in which only a few individuals tried to perfect their "libertine sensibility" (p. 169).

Winston concludes by arguing that the "fixist" approach came to dominate the discourse of perfectibility. The ascendancy of "fixist" views over more egalitarian ideas about human progress, argues Winston, influenced three major areas of thought. First, nineteenth-century social theorists tended to model society on natural laws rather than on the efforts of individuals. Second, the exclusion of women from the public sphere solidified. Third, the rise of "fixism" assisted in the development of racism in the nineteenth century and, ultimately, modern theories of eugenics. These are three weighty and significant arguments, but they are largely undeveloped in a conclusion that is only two pages in length.

Winston follows in the footsteps of other specialists in eighteenth-century literature who have focused their attention on scientific and medical narratives. In his introduction, he situates himself specifically *vis-à-vis* Anne Vila and Julia Douthwaite.[3] But where Vila and Douthwaite are more active in contextualizing their studies, Winston instead constrains his focus to an analysis of the texts at hand. Winston does gesture to the cultural impact of the discourses he is analyzing, for example, with respect to the French Revolution and the links between perfectibility and the regeneration of man; he does not, however, engage with much of the recent historiography on science and medicine during the Enlightenment and revolutionary periods.[4]

More broadly, the question of the parameters of the book requires some additional justification. Winston focuses on the second half of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century. Implicitly, then, this is a key period for medical meliorism. Indeed, Winston begins his introduction by noting that those theorists who first articulated ideas of eugenics in the nineteenth century were, in turn, influenced by eighteenth-century medical ideas. But why was this era significant

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for the development of these concepts? Was there a change in medical thinking during this period? Winston never fully articulates the importance of the second half of the eighteenth century for the development of these ideas in part because he never situates his analysis within the time period. Winston would have strengthened the impact of his discussion of these various authors had he indicated more clearly why their debates and discussions were so important within the context of the period.

A clearer conceptualization of his key concept, meliorism, would also have helped. It is unclear exactly how the modern notion of meliorism, which has to do with improving social conditions through human effort and education, relates to the medically-oriented ideas of eighteenth-century perfectibility discussed by Winston. Are “meliorist discourses” somehow different from “perfectibility discourses” or “discourses of progress”?

Winston offers an interesting analysis of the idea of perfectibility within medical, philosophical, and literary discourses. Deeper contextualization would certainly have strengthened his argument, and it would have allowed him to delve more deeply into the connections between late eighteenth-century ideas of perfectibility and the developments of the nineteenth century. Stylistically, the book suffers from an inordinate number of typographical errors as well as some repetitions (of sentences and examples). While Réaumur’s suggestion that one could cross-breed a chicken with a rabbit is certainly amusing, the story needs to be told only once. Overall, however, this is a useful monograph that specialists will find interesting.

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#### NOTES

[1] J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origins and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1920); cf. Charles Frankel, *The Faith of Reason: The Idea of Progress in the French Enlightenment* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1948).

[2] Henry Vyverberg, *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

[3] Anne Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Julia Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[4] See, for example, Emma Spary, *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Charles Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France at the End of the Old Regime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); idem., *Science and Polity in France: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Jean and Nicole Dhombres, *Naissance d’un pouvoir: sciences et savants en France (1793-1824)* (Paris: Payot, 1989).

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