

**Rowan Boyson, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012. £55. ISBN 9781107023307.**

For Matthew Arnold, Wordsworth's poetry was 'great' because it universalized a joy modern criticism has struggled to embrace. Writing in the 'Preface' to his 1879 edition of Wordsworth's poetry, Arnold cites *Home at Grasmere's* 'Of joy in widest commonality spread' because of its 'extraordinary power' to offer the reader joy and present 'it so as to make us share it'. The history of Wordsworth studies since Arnold, however, has been more suspicious of this proclamation. From the Yale School to New Historicism, critics have expressed anxiety towards and disapproval of Wordsworth's poetic moments of pleasure, happiness, bliss and joy. As Rowan Boyson points out in her study, Wordsworth's 'version of pleasure' has been condemned for 'being "bad": transcendentalizing, distracting, disembodied, individualizing, or not individualizing enough and rather falsely universal' (14). While the affective turn of the last decade or so has done much to redress the demonizing of feeling and experience in literary studies, a resistance to subjects like 'pleasure' remains in part because of our inheritance of it from an Enlightenment we assume stripped it of ethical or political importance. This study brilliantly examines the modern misreading of Enlightenment pleasure, reframing it as communal, collective and joyous (rather than private, solipsistic and disinterested). Boyson excels at engaging the reader with an argument that is at once historical, political and philosophical, but that skilfully holds on to the literary and aesthetic. From the book's first half on Shaftesbury, Kant and the *sensus communis* and Rousseau and Wollstonecraft's utopian elevation of pleasure, to its second half on Wordsworth, Boyson's study remains in control of a vast amount of material and carefully shepherds it in a lucid and persuasive political defence of Enlightenment pleasure.

Her defence begins in Part I's insightful discussion of eighteenth-century sociability, communality and sensibility under the banner of 'Pleasure philosophy'. The first chapter's analysis of Shaftesbury, Kant and the *sensus communis* explores the idea that 'pleasure is inherently sociable' (25), a feeling that is experienced both for and with others and dictated by nature, not the state. Human 'enjoyment of the arts', including poetry, is too shaped by an innate pleasure in order for Shaftesbury, one that Boyson links to Kant's summation of 'aesthetic and logical judgement' as directed towards the 'feeling of pleasure' (31, 45). This post-Hobbesian reading of pleasure also looks forward to Rousseau and Wollstonecraft's sense of it as a 'natural power' that 'makes possible out relations with other people, creating the generosity and hope which must underline any kind of community' (68). Boyson is at her best when she draws on the depths of her research to make such statements, materially connecting affective experience to a lived understanding of human relationships and in doing so weakening the prominence of modern definitions of egoism and selfishness in our reading of 'self-interest' and 'self-love' in this period. Wollstonecraft, Boyson shows by way of example, differentiates 'good and bad forms of self-love' to survey what kinds of enjoyment, sensation and experience might generate social pleasures (such as sympathy) that offer women real power, a Deleuzian becoming into utopian potential. Boyson draws on Deleuze, as well as Adorno, Barthes and Arendt, as readily as she does recent criticism in the fields of Romanticism, affect studies and eighteenth-century history, habituating the reader to complex theories of pleasure even as she breaks new ground in reading it.

The ingenuity of her argument is illuminated again in Part II, 'Wordsworth's common pleasure', comprising three chapters (on *Lyrical Ballads*; *Home at Grasmere* and *The Prelude*; and *The Excursion*) that rethinks Wordsworthian pleasure as non-teleological and circular, and so radical. Images of 'blood, breath, motion, life, spirit and gift' in the opening of *The Prelude*, for example, evince a 'thoughtless bliss' for Boyson, a non-egoic pleasure that invites the reader to reflect on its content: 'is it something pre-reflective, pre-sexual, pre-

relational, almost pre-experiential . . . akin to the *sensus communis* [or a] kind of feeling of attunement and universality that must be in place before we can think at all?' (151). Boyson turns to Sebastian Timparano's idea of pessimistic hedonism to offer one possible answer, and extends this out to a reading of happiness in *The Excursion* as a materially felt narrative structured by a double agenda: a humanist desire to define an anthropological happiness coupled with a Tory-liberal and ultimately imperial will for order. Boyson's flair as a critic is again underlined here: unlike many critics of this much overlooked poem, she declines to bulldoze *The Excursion*'s content, recognizing it as constitutive of a poem that exists both in historical and philosophical time. Such an approach engages the spiritual aspects of the poem too, the poem's theology addressed finely here alongside its engagement with education, the poor and nationality, all ways that might help a reader envision the 'happy life'.

There is no doubt that *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* offers a significant argument that I hope will both influence Wordsworth studies and open up the positive experiences his poetry offers for further critical attention. The study might even be considered as part of the 'eudaimonic turn' that currently seeks to rescue joy, ecstasy, wonder and happiness from those critics who dismiss it as ideology or neurosis in their weary roles as the defenders of literary criticism's negativity bias. By contrast, Boyson serves as an exceptional example of a historically informed, philosophically sharp, but always imaginative and warm reader of pleasure. One might argue that it is little wonder that a critic who has clearly spent so long attending to a poet who devoted much time to the question of how to articulate pleasure is herself able to write so thoughtfully and happily. I would.

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