

The Ends of Pleasure

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In *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (Cambridge, 2012), Rowan Boyson attends to the diverse ways in which “pleasure” features in the writings of not only William Wordsworth but also the third earl of Shaftesbury, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Although the book primarily “offers a speculative, conceptual exploration of pleasure” (2), tracking the many different and often conflicting logics through which these writers deploy and figure this “remarkably mobile term” (1), Boyson’s exploration unfolds in tandem with a clear and sustained argument: pleasure, far from being seen as something private and individual, is considered “inherently communal” (1) in the eighteenth century. Whereas twentieth-century critics have tended to characterize “pleasure” as bourgeois and ideologically suspect, instead privileging more negative affective experiences and dispositions, Boyson sets out “to defend the basic, Enlightenment notion of ‘pleasure’” (9) by arguing for its ethical and political significance. She thus takes her cue not only from affect studies and recent interest in the “collective” in political theory, but also from what others have referred to as the “affirmative turn”¹ in literary and cultural studies: her aim, in part, is to “suggest that joy, affirmation and existential delight have their own ethical possibilities and are not merely bland, politically passive modes of being” (187).

The book is split into two main sections, the first of which devotes two chapters to Enlightenment “Pleasure Philosophy,” and the second of which investigates, in three chapters, “Wordsworth’s Common Pleasure.” While the first section provides something of a philosophical background to Boyson’s “case-study of Wordsworth’s poetry and prose” (2), it also provides readings of Shaftesbury and Kant (chapter one) and Rousseau and Wollstonecraft (chapter two) that stand on their own. Make no mistake, though, Wordsworth is clearly the star here, and the second section of the book is the stronger of the two, in part because Boyson’s poetic protagonist actually turns out to be more interested in pleasure—and more interesting on this topic—than his more explicitly philo-

sophical predecessors. Moreover, he also turns out to be more philosophically invested in the question of pleasure than critics have previously acknowledged. Whereas both Victorian and twentieth-century readers have tended to treat Wordsworth as *either* a poet interested in simple, affirmative affects *or* a philosophical poet (more often attuned to feelings of privation and renunciation), Boyson compellingly demonstrates that “ordinary” or “common” pleasure just is a highly philosophical notion or idea for Wordsworth.

This is not to say, however, that Wordsworth or anyone in his supporting cast has a clearly defined theory or philosophy of pleasure. As Boyson demonstrates throughout, the “basic, Enlightenment notion of ‘pleasure’” is anything but basic. Indeed, animating both her argument and the texts she considers is the simple yet largely unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) question of what pleasure is. Noting that “pleasure is not a ‘concept’ that one can finalize” (2), Boyson does not attempt to coerce a unified response out of her authors; nor, to her credit, does she selectively filter out passages that do not so clearly support her claim for pleasure’s political significance. Instead, she patiently traces the “weird difficulty” (102) of this “concept” or “idea” (the two terms are never distinguished) through readings that cumulatively suggest its pervasiveness in Enlightenment thought.

As a result, the central aims of *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* come across as somewhat divided. On the one hand, Boyson seeks to examine pleasure in and of itself, to follow out the complex and difficult turns of this term without attempting to make her account cohere in any reductively straightforward manner. On the other, she attempts to give her account coherence by arguing, over and against twentieth-century critiques of pleasure and community, that the varied aspects of pleasure together demonstrate its positive social and political importance. The book thus seems to carry out two different projects—one exploratory, the other argumentative and polemical—that justify one another but never quite come together convincingly. While Boyson certainly demonstrates that the Enlightenment idea of pleasure could potentially be “a resource for many different kinds of ethical and political argument” (14), she never makes the more important case for *why* it should be valued as such. Shared pleasure, community, hope, optimism, affirmation—all of these are treated from the start as *a priori* goods, as if nothing more than a question of “tone” (14) were at stake in “negative” post-structuralist and queer critiques of these concepts. Nevertheless, if Boyson’s polemic against rhetorics of negativity somewhat dodges the point, her rich and detailed exploration of pleasure’s “weird difficulty” effectively raises and leaves open the question of its social and political value.

The tension between exploration and argumentation is perhaps most conspicuous in chapter one, if only because the ground Boyson covers there is well trodden and, as she notes, “controversial” (57). Reading Shaftesbury’s and Kant’s more formal treatments of the *sensus communis* (in the *Inquiry Concerning*

Virtue or Merit [1711] and the *Critique of Judgment* [1790], respectively) alongside their more anthropological ones (in *Sensus Communis* [1711] and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* [1798]), she “attempt[s] to defend the link that Shaftesbury and Kant make between pleasure and community as more complex and politically significant than twentieth-century critics have recognized” (62). As becomes clear, however, “politically significant” just means “complex” for Boyson, while “complexity” (54) in her account most particularly entails the “frequent slippage” (43) between the formal and the empirical in both authors. This implied chain of equivalences is surprising, given that the possible implications of empiricizing the Kantian *sensus communis* are not slight, at least according to many twentieth-century theorists (“How many illusions or political crimes,” Jean-François Lyotard asks, “have been able to nourish themselves with this pretended immediate sharing of feelings?” [quoted in Boyson, 58]). One would thus indeed expect Boyson to defend the “political possibilities that may emerge from Kant’s eternally suggestive framework for pleasure” (24) in the *Critique of Judgment*, or at least to explain how they would not be coercive. Unfortunately, however, Boyson acknowledges but sidesteps the issue, affirming the link between pleasure and community without delineating its “political possibilities” in any real detail. Though the tentative nature of her argument here is not a shortcoming in itself, one is left wondering why it is even desirable “to rethink the politics of the *sensus communis*” (61) in the first place.

The second chapter, “Powers of Pleasure,” is more successful in accounting for the double-edged nature of pleasure politics. Through close readings of Rousseau’s *Julie* (1761) and *Emile* (1762) and Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria* (1798), Boyson shows how both authors construe “pleasure as inherently bodily or material” and link it to natural strength and health; yet she also tracks how “the positive metaphor of pleasure as power” continually manifests in “negative examples of pleasure as domination” (69), thereby putting pressure on the possibility that pleasure could exist outside of violent forms of sociality. This leads her to conclude that “we could understand Rousseau and Wollstonecraft as being pessimistic about the pleasures obtainable under actual power relations, but optimistic or utopian about how pleasure and power might be refigured in different social conditions” (92–93). Intriguingly, Boyson’s two most prominent examples of what such utopian pleasure might look like—when the eponymous protagonist of *Maria* “is effectively free from the marriage that had ‘bastilled’ her” (90) and is thus, in Wollstonecraft’s words, “left alone,”² and when Rousseau finds solitude on the Island of Saint-Pierre in the Fifth Walk of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782)—are both markedly antisocial, suggesting that pleasure might be more obtainable “against a backdrop of human sociality” (96) than in the midst of communal relations.

In turning to Wordsworth, the book expands upon the different ideas of pleasure sketched in the first two chapters and comes into its own. The sec-

tion on *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; 1800) is the most compelling, for it demonstrates definitively just how central pleasure is to Wordsworth's early understanding of poetry. Boyson first provides a persuasive reading of "Lines written in Early Spring" (1798) that puts Wordsworth in conversation with William Paley, interpreting the poem as a subtle response to utilitarianism that "separat[es] out that tradition's positive focus on pleasure from its negative instrumentalism" (109). She then turns to the prefaces of *Lyrical Ballads* and tracks the difficult turns of Wordsworth's theoretical treatment of pleasure, which "seems to combine both collective harmony and openness to novelty; habit and change; determination and freedom" (121). Here, one is able to see how Wordsworth, unlike the other authors in this study, actually "appears intellectually *agitated* by the question of pleasure" (110), a question that appears to have taken on increasing importance as he developed the Preface. Indeed, even well-versed Wordsworthians may find themselves surprised to learn that "pleasure" is mentioned 25 times in the 1800 Preface and a whopping 43 times in the 1802 Preface (by comparison, the words "poet" and "poets" are used 47 times in the latter [109–10]). The discussion of *Lyrical Ballads* thus brings into focus a conspicuous yet relatively neglected area of Wordsworth's poetics, while also illuminating a productive entry point through which one might further reconsider his engagement with utilitarian philosophy.

Boyson's case study of Wordsworth also taps into recent critical interest in indolence and passivity, underscoring the non-instrumental aspects of pleasure. While *The Prelude* (wr. 1805) attempts to classify pleasure philosophically, this classification remains both open and non-purposive in its rhetorical circularity. Similarly, *Home at Grasmere* (wr. 1800–6) revels in the "non-teleological aspects of a very ordinary pleasure" (142), putting forth images of "an untroubled and non-stimulating bliss" (150) that is neither productive nor reproductive. Boyson relates these utopian images back to Rousseau's *Reveries* and forward to the *Sur l'Eau* passage in Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951), in which "lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, 'being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment', might take the place of process, act, satisfaction" (quoted in Boyson, 151).³ It is worth noting, however, that Adorno (unlike Boyson) explicitly opposes this scene to what he refers to as "the savage spread of the social."⁴ In this regard, one would want to hear more from Boyson about how such depictions of pleasure do or do not clash with the affirmative figures of community she emphasizes and privileges throughout her study. Do the former simply stand in a negative relation to latter, or do they rather point to a different conception of sociality or community?

The final chapter on *The Excursion* (1814) effectively reframes this question without providing a conclusive answer. On the one hand, Boyson reads the poem as giving teleological direction to the passive pleasures found in *The Prelude* and *Home at Grasmere*. In framing various life stories through a narrative "of circumstance, suffering and flourishing" (182), *The Excursion* organizes plea-

sure along the lines of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*. On the other hand, she also "see[s] *The Excursion* as representing a defence of 'ordinary,' passive, unproductive pleasure, untied to larger narratives and ends" (183), and thus enacting "an immanent critique" (182) of *eudaimonia*. Here especially it is unfortunate that Boyson does not engage Vivasvan Soni's *Mourning Happiness* (2010), which she only mentions once in a footnote, presumably because of the close timing of their respective publications. The "final uncertainty" (183) she finds in *The Excursion* between a teleological and a non-teleological understanding of pleasure could potentially be read as itself a symptom of what Soni sees as the eighteenth century's failure to develop a tenable political idea of happiness, as could the conceptual contradictions and tensions Boyson illustrates in each of her chapters. Or, conversely, Boyson's close attention to "the wide range of historical and theoretical meanings that the term ['pleasure'] possesses" (186)—as well as her suggestion that the "nature of happiness" is "coercive" (182)—might be read as complicating Soni's genealogy, even challenging his rhetoric of failure and his own "utopian" desire for a classical idea of happiness.⁵

In any case, though, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* is at its best when it sets aside concerns of critical positioning and simply grapples with and exposes the difficulties in thinking through "one of the most basic and yet little-studied facets of eighteenth-century feeling" (1). Throughout, Boyson argues for "affirmative descriptions of shared life" (15) so as to counter what she judges to be a critical overemphasis on rhetorics of pain, privation, and negation, and her point here is well taken. Yet, as her own examples and analyses suggest, pleasure, whatever it may be—and however it may be derived—is not something that one can easily categorize or valorize in relation to the social, let alone the political. Boyson's most insightful discussions thus serve to remind us that we would do well to approach any object of study without presupposing its value—social, political, or otherwise. After all, one thing that makes the idea of pleasure both social and political is that its meaning and significance is open and contestable. The strength of *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* is that it not only reopens but leaves open an important site of such contestation.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, 2010), 213.
2. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* [1798] (Oxford, 1976), 163.
3. See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951] (New York, 1974), 155–57. This passage has also drawn interest in other recent and notable works; see, for example, Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession* (Stanford, 2009), 13; and Rei Terada, "The Life Process and Forgettable Living: Arendt and Agamben," *New Formations* 71 (2011): 95–109, 106.
4. Adorno, 156.
5. Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (Ithaca, 2010), 5.