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John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012. xiii + 294 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$25.95 (pb). 978-0-8047-4212-2.

Review by Darrin M. McMahon, Florida State University.

You are not liable to find a book like this in a generation's time. Composed entirely of previously published essays with the addition of a synthetic introduction that seeks to give unity to the pieces and the career behind them, the book is a sort of personal *Festschrift*, nicely produced, with some seventeen period illustrations, and several essays that may not be immediately accessible via standard online databases. Still, the book is a luxury—certainly for the press that produced it, as well as for the author whose articles are gathered between its pages, but also for readers. Whether such luxuries will be missed when they are gone, deemed an extravagance that we can no longer afford, is partly a matter of taste.

That said, this is not in any way meant to impugn the author, a distinguished *dix-huitièmiste* and former director of the Stanford Humanities Center, who has produced during the course of a career spanning over four decades a wealth of research on the literary, scientific, and visual cultures of Britain and France. The essays gathered here were published between 1987 and 2010 and aim collectively to deal “with the Enlightenment and its consequences, but always from today's perspective” (p. 3). Bender does not attempt a “strict reconstruction” of the past even when his arguments “depend on historical understanding.” Rather, he seeks to employ more recent analytic and interpretive lenses in order to examine the “armature of the Enlightenment” as both a movement and a period long over, yet one that strangely refuses to die. “Enlightenment repeated itself in the twentieth century,” Bender observes cryptically, “and is doing so still today, but with the differences inevitably present in return and with the productive dissonance that belated repetition enables” (p. 4). Although the writing as a whole in these essays is limpid, this sentence is somewhat obscure. Yet, clearly Bender understands his subject as one that is not finished. There is a “continuing presence” of the Enlightenment's purposes, as he puts it, and seemingly no end to its ends.

That continuing presence is very much on display in these essays, which provide in their dialogic engagement with the past not only a series of appraisals of eighteenth-century culture, but also a snapshot of the preoccupations—theoretical and otherwise—of a certain kind of cultural studies and literary-minded scholarship of the Enlightenment of the last twenty five years, as configured by one of its better practitioners. Not surprisingly to those familiar with Bender's earlier work—particularly his 1987 *Imagining the Penitentiary*—Foucault is a presence in many of these essays, which are concerned with the marshaling of truth claims and the depiction of knowledge and power.[1] Heidegger makes an appearance or two, as Bender engages with his notion of “facticity”—everyday, unreflective experience of the world, which in Heidegger's reckoning comes to us already interpreted—in an illuminating essay on Hogarth. Habermas and the public sphere are frequently invoked, Adorno and Horkheimer get a nod, and there is an effort to show, based on a reading of three modern novels (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dracula*) that “reality” or the “real” operate in the modern world as “myth.” Those sniffing around for stereotypes will even find an essay, co-written with Robin Valenza, defending the abstruse and

specialized jargon of literature, the humanities, and the social sciences from those who would demand that such writing be rendered in ordinary language.

If all this is pretty much as one might be led to expect, Bender does have surprises in store. His intimate knowledge of the eighteenth century inoculates him, as it were, from the bouts of febrile imagination that tended to afflict practitioners of literary and cultural studies in the 1980s and 90s, who in a similar avoidance of “strict reconstruction” were tempted to make of the past in general and the Enlightenment in particular anything their theories fancied. Bender’s skepticism is in fact not so much postmodern as Humean. Throughout he evinces a deep admiration for the genial Scot and a deep familiarity with his work. And while Bender is not prepared to take sides on the past—“To be for or against the Enlightenment ... is a burden” he writes pragmatically, invoking Foucault (p. 15)—he clearly believes that a number of Enlightenment practices (above all, criticism itself) and “real, if at times tremulous, values” like human rights, the rule of the majority, and judicial process, are worth defending. Like stop signs, he observes, they help us get on in the world and keep us safe. The resultant orientation and tone of these essays is not infrequently like Hume’s, skeptical and bemused, energetic and critically searching, yet commonsensical and balanced.

That is particularly the case with the essays that deal, as six of them do, with the novel, and more particularly with the novel as an epistemological site, a place for doing practical philosophy, for inquiring into the possibilities of knowledge. Here Bender’s evident personal passions and breadth as a humanist of ample curiosity come through clearly. In the volume’s opening, and arguably, finest essays, Bender argues provocatively for the close affinities between the development of modern scientific theory and practice and the development of the theory and practice of the novel. Drawing parallels between the “dense particularity” and the highly contrived nature of the modern scientific experiment in relationship to literary anecdote and plotting, he argues at the same time that the sentimental education required of the empathic literary spectator bears an intriguing similarity to what Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer describe as the “virtual witnessing” and confirmation of experimental reports.

The result of such probing in realms—the literary and the scientific—that are too often treated apart is to turn up evidence for the ways in which the novel figures in the discursive networks of the Scientific Revolution. In a later essay on William Godwin’s novel, *Caleb Williams*, Bender pursues a similarly fruitful strategy of juxtaposition and comparison, examining the representational strategies and narrative techniques Godwin uses to anatomize his characters against the background of contemporary anatomical practices. Finally, in the volume’s final essay, co-written with David E. Wellbery, Bender offers a sweeping intellectual history of the fate of rhetoric, tracing its classical birth and death in the Enlightenment, while positing its re-birth in modernity.

Reading these essays in a volume like this one—as opposed to the journals and books where they first appeared and are still available—may well be a luxury that the scholarly and academic world will soon be unable to afford, but one can hope that the kind of free and cross-disciplinary scholarship in the humanities that the best of these essays represent will not, too, someday be deemed too great a luxury.

NOTE

[1] John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

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