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Marine Ganofsky and Jean-Alexandre Perras, eds., *Le Siècle de la légèreté. Émergences d'un paradigme du dix-huitième siècle français*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. xiv + 322 pp. Illustrations, summaries, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-78694-195-4.

Review by Servanne Woodward, University of Western Ontario.

Although there have been studies of the vertical view, challenging the place of humanity in nature as offered by journeys in hot air balloons, and of the sociability associating open egalitarian encounters with the newly minted “smile of sociability” as seen in Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s portraiture [1] and studied as part of the “history of emotions” (see Jan Plamper and Rob Boddice among others), the paradigm of “lightness,” its developments and its interpretations, have been mostly overlooked. When it has been taken into consideration, each study has stood isolated or as part of other fields, such as the culture of “sensitivity,” emotions, and new interests in the senses and perception—with Condillac, for instance.

This current collective work on the idea of “lightness” has the merit of highlighting the cohesion of apparently disconnected thematic and cultural studies previously published: *L’Invention de la vitesse. France XVIII-XX^e siècle* by Christophe Studeney; *The Pursuit of Laziness. An Idle Interpretation of the Enlightenment*, by Pierre Saint-Amant; and *The Imagined Empire. Balloon Enlightenment in Revolutionary Europe*, by Mi Gyung Kim, who provides an interpretation of the politics of lightness when she observes that crowd control became necessary at the occasion of hot-air balloon launches, a spectacle that caught people’s imagination and suggested social emancipation.[2] Before getting to this point in history, Ganofsky and Perras estimate that, although the paradigm of lightness defining the eighteenth century and French sociability is post-revolutionary, it is possible to locate its origin in the convoluted absence of gravity in French rococo art—epitomized by such works as Boucher’s “Triumph of Venus” (1740). Whether by design or coincidence, the most modern scientific debates of the eighteenth century touched upon the subject of “lightness” as part of gravity, or as an absence of mass versus lack of earth’s attraction, and they combined with the aerial touches of French rococo to form a catch-all point of reference modelling social engagement, life aesthetics, self-image and fashion, transports, sciences, music and visual arts, rhetoric, and one’s rank or collective national identity.[3]

For philosophers of the Enlightenment, the most extravagant flights of imagination should relate to “truth” and lend meaning and order to the world,[4] or at least atmospheric speculations on the nature and motions of clouds.[5] In aesthetic terms, during the second half

of the century, a segment of French society leaned toward neoclassicism and the sublime, whereas the “new paradigm” of French lightness persisted and renewed itself throughout the century and beyond, as a voluptuous and festive counter-current to the Enlightenment and to the rational development of industrious bourgeois society. During the nineteenth century, the values of “lightness” tended to turn negative and was applied to describe idle and vapid individuals. Positive lightness had little room in post-revolutionary society, unless it was mobilized as a characteristic of luxury products, produced by profitable industries. The nineteenth-century mercantile use of late eighteenth-century aristocratic “lightness” is aptly evoked in Emile Zola’s novel, *Au Bonheur des dames* (*Ladies’ Paradise*), named after the fashion supermarket tailored for mass consumption by women. Cyril Barde details how the nineteenth century welded modernism with the idea of lightness that was associated with the ancien regime: gloves, fans, dragonflies, and butterflies are among the accessories women wore, while architects were inspired by the imaginary structures dreamt by Watteau and Fragonard. Femininity is marketed and fetishized in the swarms of diaphanous trinkets.[6] Élise Urbain introduces us to the negligee; Barde, to diminutive accessories evoking flying insects; and Érika Wicky, to evanescent perfumes, imbued with the precious property of the ephemeral. The discretion of an evanescent scent was by then considered an effect of seduction in secrecy and privilege, while strong smells broadcast the lower castes’ eroticism. Wicky contends that “lightness as scent” was a product of a general consumption eventually promoted in magazines such as *L’Illustration*. The Enlightenment is not opposed to this later commercial and industrial evolution, as evidenced by the volumes of technological designs in *L’Encyclopédie* giving the details of weaving machines used for the mass production of stockings, for instance.

However, for most of the authors, “lightness” is a defining aesthetic of “French” national culture, encompassing open and engaging manners, and a certain duty to remain attractive, playful and seductive. Maria Susana Seguin argues that such diverse authors as Marivaux, Beaumarchais, Crébillon *films*, Voltaire and Diderot used ornamental pleasantries to address serious matters, a means of communication already used to avoid royal censorship when discussing the nature of the universe in relation to humanity. Nonchalant or lazy readers should not have been bored and they expected entertainment. The conversational tone instead sprang from attempts to vulgarize obscure and dense new sciences complicated by calculus. Fontenelle addresses his botanic studies to a female readership. Periodic journals attempted to mix of science and entertainment in order to explain inconsistent physical manifestations, such as Cartesian whirlwinds, and to feed a new interest in meteorology. It is not so dissimilar to a practice that occurs even today, in the form of “infotainment,” the 1980s phenomenon of combining scientific information and entertainment for television.

Lightness is a way of life. The witty and inconsequential Voisenon vanishes in smoke in his obituary thanks to a typographical error, after having barely lived, in elation and glee, in his frail asthmatic body. Patrick Wald Lasowski summarizes the heroic traits of sociability, when to be loved is preferable to being important, and generosity is “communication, circulation” (p. 33). Marine Ganofsky locates the origin of such sociability in libertine circles and proposes to explain such lightness in modern terms. The archetype of light readings, *Angola* (1746) by La Morlière, is read through the lens of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, and the vacuous life of a queen through Sophia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Frivolous, evanescent pleasures are sought in tiny bound publications, uncovering a new facet to “lightness” in the form of brevity and effortless speed. Diversion is a flight to escape the human condition, but also the ability to enjoy oneself in the here and now.

“Lightness” is eventually an elite quality of apparent neglect resulting from rigorous training. Maxime Triquenaux explains that the noble, worldly, conversational style must seem apparently effortless, equivalent to a sketch as opposed to a finished painting, or a negligee compared to a proper dress. Heroics are replaced by “flippancy” and nonchalant attitudes convey superiority over constraints, ignoble people, or circumstances (p. 59). Verbal jousts and easy dancing motions demand exacting practice and stand as evidence of rank. Most upwardly mobile gentlemen studied dance so that they could move through life elegantly.[7] Kate Grandjouan details the importance of this art of polite bearing, and she reports on the numerous dancing books translated for an English readership.

The charm of the nonchalant easy carriage of “The Indifferent” (1717) by Watteau typifies this graceful attitude. Kevin Hilliard confirms that ease is truly evidence of mastery when discussing Voltaire’s neglectful epistolary style of mingling prose and verses to show his ability to converse with aristocratic correspondents. Its model in antiquity was Anacreon, who opposed Epicurean laziness to labor—not to mastery. By the 1760s, a reaction against French rococo as frivolous arose,[8] and “lightness” was rejected as a mode of living because it was associated with salon and aristocratic mores. What was condemned was the wasteful energy spent on the pursuit of ephemeral matters.

Hilliard introduces a different dimension of “lightness,” constructed as a foil to a national identity of virtue in Germany at the time of muscular and virile heroics in *Sturm und Drang*. Kate Grandjouan traces the vilification of French lightness in English caricature. It is characterized as French inconsistency or “airiness” and “apishness,” focused on the art of dancing as a model of virility at a time when theories of national character abound, circa 1750 (p. 91). At the time of the French Revolution, emaciated Frenchmen were cast as monkey-like dancers,[9] unlike the corpulent British people, and they were depicted as eating bland foods, as opposed to thick British roasts. The article on the abbé Galiani by Azzurra Mauro focusses on the Neapolitan’s humour. Galiani innovated on Parisian dialogic style about a somber matter: famine caused by the changes of policies concerning the commerce of wheat—edited by Diderot. Mauro claims that Galiani’s comments, making light of an important subject, shifted the corresponding French paradigm of his admirers, including Voltaire and Marmontel. Mauro also stresses that this rococo style of expression belonged to aristocratic circles and, more importantly, that its aesthetics proposed counterpoints so that their flow became more rational, more subtle and more thorough than through meditation and enthusiasm alone. To better understand this passage between rococo art and pre-romanticism, Urbain reports on the disagreement between Diderot and the Count of Caylus. It pertained to the speed of execution as “lightness” in art: the former saw inspiration, private moments of abandon, while the latter perceived the impression of “freshness” as it is painstakingly projected (p. 241).

Eventually, “lightness” glorifies weakness, as well as brittleness, and predicts falls as unavoidable and inherently funny, and life as a laughable failure. Jean-Alexandre Perras commented on the fast and light *cabriolets* that seemed prone to accidents. Hence, the portrait of “Voltaire in a *cabriolet*” by Jean Hubert (part of the Hermitage collection) is accompanied by a few lines of comical self-deprecating observation on this mode of transportation in a letter from the aging patriarch to Tronchin (dated June 22, 1764). Voltaire depicted himself as something like an old man in a convertible sports car. Perras also shows us wigs styled for men “à la *cabriolet*” (p. 205), for those who shared fantasies of speeds approximating flight. Anthony Wall

studies scale and gravity as represented in the bridges of Hubert Robert (in more than 700 paintings), where small characters progress, precariously perched on crumbling structures, either seeking their own demise in arduous passages or temporarily warding off their inevitable demise. In paintings of women lounging in the morning, the negligee expresses ease of motion and comfort and it suggests feminine spontaneity, perhaps a form of women's corporeal liberation as they opt out of proper Christian "raideur" (p. 245) and rigid clothing and, in this demotion, they gain both absence of constraint and psychological comfort—whether it be in the form of laziness, ease, or freedom. Joël Castonguay-Bélanger reconciles attraction and mechanistic thoughts in the construction of montgolppliers (hot-air balloons), as he explores the new heroism of height and sky travelers and contrasts reactions to flight that range from epic praise for self-sacrificing heroes to fever, folly, and inevitable fall.

Paradoxically, when gravitational laws are discovered to imply irremediable falls, machines tend to counter their vexing effects by cultivating "lightness" as an impetus for flight and speed. Those, too, will become driving forces of modernism, futurism, and niches of luxury industry, the technology of speed (currently Airbus planes and TGV train lines), and the commerce of luxury—still among France's main exports. In a sense, aristocratic values of lightness yoked to science have been converted into economic capital. As anticipated by the editors of this volume, some of the complexity of French lightness of the eighteenth century has been recognized, and the motivations for its monolithic and cartoonish characterizations by competing nations or nineteenth-century intellectuals have been exposed. The volume certainly will foster new studies on lightness and, one hopes, perhaps slowness, abyss, petrification, mass and gravity will be studied with equal success.

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NOTES

[1] Colin Jones, *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2] Christophe Studeny, *L’Invention de la vitesse. France XVIII^e-XX^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995); Pierre Saint-Amant, *The Pursuit of Laziness. An Idle Interpretation of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Mi Gyung Kim, *The Imagined Empire. Balloon Enlightenments in Revolutionary Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

[3] The *Encyclopaedia* traces several strands of “lightness,” beginning with a divergence between d’Alembert and Newton (p. 5). Jean-Olivier Richard studies the scientific writer, *le père Castel*. Richard insists on Newtonian gravity as motivating the paradigm of lightness (p. 147). The originality of Castel is to suppose other forces combined with gravity, such as lightness (p. 155).

[4] Michel Delon, “Préface,” in Denis Diderot, *Salons*, ed. Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 24.

[5] Diderot, *Salons*, p. 81.

[6] Susan Hiner, *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[7] Mme de Warrens hired fencing and dancing masters for young Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the hope of helping him rise in society. In *Confessions*, Rousseau explains how he hated both

activities, claiming that walking had made him constitutionally unable to dance. Rousseau assigned republican and democratic virtues to slow journeys and walking efficiently heels first, while he rejected the tiptoe mastery of aristocratic French “lightness” on political grounds.

[8] Diderot, *Salons*, p. 49.

[9] Grandjouan explains how, as evidence of this, Hogarth's engraving entitled *Noon* (1738) was used to this purpose. In the image, a family, highlighted in the foreground ("lit") leaves St. Giles church in the Soho district of London. As they do so, the man gesticulates, turning toward his wife at the same time as he points to their child, rotating on his left leg as he lifts his right leg, in a dancing movement. The family is identified as French by their clothes, and the dancing posture struck by the couple is judged ridiculous and out of place, as well as disgraceful. One can see the image at:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/403267>

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