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Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. ix + 310 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN: 9780823226962.

Review by Anne Vila, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Natania Meeker's *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment* aims to be many things at once: a new account of eighteenth-century French materialist philosophy; an exploration of subjectivity, considered in relation to reading, pleasure, and the process of becoming "enlightened"; a fresh perspective on such famous (and sometimes infamous) materialist authors as Julien Offray de La Mettrie, Jean-Baptiste de Boyer d'Argens, Denis Diderot, and Donatien François Alphonse de Sade; and a contribution to the theory of embodiment advanced by literary critics like Judith Butler, Daniel Tiffany, and Dalia Judovitz.^[1] Meeker's touchstone throughout the book is the classical thinker Lucretius—a predictable enough choice, given her focus on materialism, but one that Meeker makes for a very specific and original purpose: to read the eighteenth-century Lucretian legacy from the perspective of literature. Thus, rather than focusing on how materialist *philosophes* responded to Lucretius's atomism, atheism, or hedonism, Meeker undertakes to examine whether or not they accepted his homology between matter and poetry, his conviction that the truth-value of materialist philosophy hangs upon "the perception of matter in its figural dimensions," the "materialization of the poetic trope in the voluptuous bodily responses of readers to the texts that they are moved to enjoy," and the recognition of voluptuous pleasure as a form of cognition (pp. 6-7). Although Meeker speaks frequently of corporeal enjoyment, the bodies in question are not those of the flesh-and-blood variety: matter, as depicted here, is primarily a textual or textually-anchored substance, embodied during the act of reading. Seen from this angle, the period's most significant investigations into the nature of matter are to be located not in science or natural philosophy, but in literature—the site in which, Meeker maintains, crucial aspects of the "debate around the epistemological status and ethical aims of Enlightenment materialism" unfolded (p. 15).

The approach which *Voluptuous Philosophy* proposes to eighteenth-century French philosophy is, to say the least, complex and ambitious. For Meeker (who teaches French literature at the University of Southern California), the Enlightenment is less an historical era than a moment in the evolution of the "Kantian movement into maturity," a movement that ultimately "forgot" the neo-Lucretian materialism featured in this book (pp. 12-13). Her central thesis is that, over the course of the eighteenth century, a rift took place between two sorts of materialism: one that remained committed to the Lucretian-Epicurean association between delighting the reader and transforming him/her into a materialist, and one that sought to "distinguish the epistemological project of knowing matter from the poetic experience of feeling the effects of figure" (p. 9). That struggle, Meeker contends, played out largely in the literary genre of the novel—an area of textual production especially apt to inspire strong emotions, sympathetic identification, and the dangerous act of pleasure-reading. She accordingly gives pride of place to novelists, whose representatives in *Voluptuous Philosophy* are divided into two opposing camps. On one side of the divide, we find Sade, who sought to revive the Lucretian approach to poetic figure as a vehicle for converting his readers intellectually by arousing them physically. La Mettrie, although not a novelist, is included in this camp because of what Meeker calls his "extraordinary tropiness"—that is, his deep investment in literary practice and literary pleasures (p. 90). On the other side, there are more "enlightened" and "modern" novelists like d'Argens and Diderot, who, despite their unmistakable zest for the erotic, are portrayed as disavowing *voluptas* in favor of "the self-possession of the philosophical

reader as crucial to the exercise of reasoned judgment” (p. 9). By the end of the Enlightenment, Meeker argues, only the fully self-possessed reader was deemed capable of reflecting on matter with the emancipated, critical dispassion required of the Kantian rational subject. As a result, *voluptas* lost its classical status as an epistemological instrument; and materialism became distinctly unvoluptuous, nonfigural, and scientific.

Voluptuous Philosophy can be read as a sophisticated venture in intertextual literary analysis: Meeker demonstrates skill and panache in reading such works as *l'Homme machine*, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, and the *Histoire de Juliette* in tandem with selected passages from Lucretius's *De rerum natura*. At the same time, her study clearly aspires to be more than an exercise in literary criticism: it also wants to be an intellectual history, one that (with various nods to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) recounts the genesis of a certain kind of modernism, a certain mode of subjectivity, a certain mode of engagement between text and substance. It is not, however, particularly attentive to the messy historical particulars of materialism, the polemics over the Enlightenment movement, or the larger culture of reading and novelistic practice during this period. Meeker's lack of interest in those issues is apparent as soon as she begins laying out the basic elements of her speculative argument: first, her contention that Lucretianism was most significant in eighteenth-century France not as a vision of nature (i.e., as chance-driven, self-creating, and dynamically mutable), but as a mode of conceptualizing the relationship between words and matter; and second, her claim that reading protocols shifted inexorably away from a view of reading as a “somatic event” and toward “reading as the accrual of knowledge to an abstracted subject” (pp. 86-87). Provocative as those claims are, they are not supported by adequate historical evidence—or, for that matter, by her textual analyses, which proceed by strategic omission as much as by productive engagement with the primary material (more on that below). Finally, Meeker never examines her own assumptions regarding historical genesis and causality: much is said here about legacies, influences, re-readings, and “backward-” versus “forward-looking” gestures (13, 47-58, 81-87, 126, 149, passim), but Meeker remains vague both about the mechanisms involved in “enlightenment” (as she conceives of it) and about the means by which the theory of literary materialism she is describing passed from one author to another.

For all that, the book is consistently thought-provoking, from its two introductory chapters to the four single author-centered chapters that follow. Chapter one is divided between a learned demonstration of how Lucretius constructs the ideal philosophical reader in *De rerum natura* and a consideration of how that work was received by successive Enlightenment-era French commentators and translators—all of whom worked, to varying degrees, to undo the Lucretian “amalgamation of lyric and material science,” to split apart *voluptas* and *voluntas*, and to divest the work of its previously emphasized capacity to shape the material experiences of its reader (pp. 51, 58). Meeker elaborates her model of the non-voluptuous philosophical reader in chapter two, which features two mid-century essays, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Discours sur la lecture* (1764) and Louis Bouilloud-Mermet's *Essai sur la lecture* (1765). Those two works have been paired before, most notably by Nathalie Ferrand in her synthetic study of how eighteenth-century French writers represented the experience of reading.^[2] What is new here is the broad, somewhat curious claim that Meeker extrapolates out of them: she contends that both Mercier and Bouilloud-Mermet moved toward “the construction of ideal readers whose power and authority increase in proportion to the degree that they are abstracted from sensation—neutralized images of disembodied judgment” (p. 75). These authors thus participated in the “demise of the voluptuous reader as the subject of reflection” (p. 87).

One might respond, Mark Twain-like, that Meeker's reports of the death of that reader are greatly exaggerated. Mercier, for one, may have decried pleasure-reading in his *Discours sur la lecture*, but he explicitly linked voluptuousness and knowledge-seeking in another academic discourse, *Le bonheur des gens de lettres* (1766), where he portrayed the Man of Letters in ecstatic, reading-induced meditation—a figure hard to reconcile with Meeker's image of the ideal reader as constrained or abstracted from pleasurable, visceral feeling. Part of the problem here is the narrowness of Meeker's approach: she

doesn't explore more of Mercier than a single essay, nor does she place him and Bouilloud-Mermet in the context of the period's larger efforts to train readers both morally and pedagogically, protocols that entailed more than simply differentiating between "good" and "bad" readers. Meeker's model of the dispassionate philosophical reader is not necessarily wrong, but it is difficult to accept the idea that the pleasure-reader was killed off at mid-century and replaced by a more enlightened reading subject who calmly followed a "trajectory toward self-possession" (p. 81). Her entire thesis about the relationship between reading, pleasure, and philosophy would have been more persuasive if she had framed it with a deeper examination of the diversity of eighteenth-century reading practices and drawn on more of the excellent historical studies that Roger Chartier and others have devoted to the topic over the past twenty-five years. It would also have benefited from greater engagement with the phenomena of sensibility and sentimentality, both of which coexisted with rationalism in ways more complicated than Meeker acknowledges--and which played a more extensive, more nuanced role in the formation of philosophical identity than she suggests.

There is, in fact, a misplaced dualism at the heart of Meeker's approach to materialism and identity-formation in eighteenth-century France: she never seems to ponder the anachronism implicit in a definition of "enlightened" subjectivity that assumes that the mind and body were mutually disenfranchised from each other. This was, after all, a period famous for its monism, its insistence on the mutual permeability of the moral and the physical; but Meeker's account of French Enlightenment philosophy leaves no room for monism and virtually none for sensationalism, the sense-based epistemology that, in its methods if not its ideology, had clear ties to materialism. Another major gap in Meeker's analysis is its lack of attention to the actual corporeal mechanisms which a wide range of eighteenth-century commentators attributed to the act of reading: she frequently evokes "physiological effects," especially when discussing libertine/ pornographic literature, but she never explains what those effects actually entailed somatically. This may be because she considers them insignificant for her literary theory of materiality, according to which the embodiment occurring in readers involves language, not organs. The irony here is that sensationalism, as promoted by its most prominent theorist, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, was built upon a theory of language and idea-formation that was itself anchored in the body.[3]

Meeker's indifference to the fine points of scientific (as opposed to literary) materialism is not especially problematic for her two most literary chapters: chapter four, a well-executed close reading of d'Argens *Thérèse philosophe*; and chapter six, which offers a clever analysis of the "new" materialist subject which Sade constructs in his literary-historical essay *Idée sur les romans* and in his libertine fiction. It does, however, make for some skewed interpretations of La Mettrie and Diderot, in chapters three and five, respectively. First, Meeker is so determined to find "tropic bodies" in La Mettrie that she underestimates the heuristic intent of his machine-man metaphor: after peremptorily concluding that La Mettrie viewed the organic body as a passive, mindless automaton, she declares that "he offers up the machine-man metaphor to us as pure figure" (p. 89). Her insistence that "tropiness" is the ultimate signifying element in *L'Homme machine* does not do justice to the author's attempts to grapple with the operations of real, organic materiality--efforts that have far less to do with Epicurean atoms (the subject to which Meeker abruptly shifts midway through her analysis [pp. 92-96], before shifting again to La Mettrie's short essay *La Volupté* [pp. 103-125]) than with efforts by contemporary experimental physiologists like Albrecht von Haller to pinpoint the dynamic mainsprings of the living organism.

Likewise, Meeker's account of the "mature," physically disengaged materialist reader in Diderot does not capture the subtlety and ambiguity of that author. Meeker is quite right to note at the outset of chapter five that Diderot is a central figure for her project. Unfortunately, however, she seems so intent on getting her argument to its post-Lucretian (Kantian) stage that she boxes herself and Diderot into a corner: "Diderot, I hope to demonstrate, makes fascinating use of Epicurean materialism as an explanatory technique, but in doing so must leave behind a Lucretian focus on the conversive power of poetic speech as engendering a meaningful philosophic relationship to materiality" (p. 156). Although

Diderot did, indeed, perceive enormous tensions between mind and body, as between pleasure and seriousness in philosophic /aesthetic endeavor, he never opted clearly in favor of one over the other; moreover, if any eighteenth-century French writer continued to believe in the “conversive power of poetic speech,” surely it was Diderot.[4] Meeker’s opposition between “philosopher-critics” and “hedonistic readers” in the *Eloge de Richardson* is simply too cut and dry, capturing neither the autobiographical notes that Diderot interjects into the text (where he styles himself as anything but a dispassionate, emotionally disengaged reader of Richardson) nor the non-frivolous, socially edifying qualities he attributes to sentimental reading. A similar distortion mars Meeker’s analysis of the *Rêve de d’Alembert*: although it builds carefully (and politely) on existing approaches to the text as a demonstration of “poetic” materialism, it typecasts Mlle de l’Espinasse as the “bad” reader and Dr. Bordeu as the “good” reader of the central dialogue, thus failing to capture the dynamic instability of character and identity which Diderot imputes to both of them (and to the dreaming d’Alembert). As with La Mettrie, the fundamental oversight that Meeker makes in regard to Diderot is her failure to recognize the other, non-Lucretian sources of his materialism: most particularly, the medical vitalism espoused by the real-life Bordeu, which provided Diderot with some of his most interesting figures of matter.

Voluptuous Philosophy is clearly an attempt to break our habits of thinking about eighteenth-century French materialism by making us more attuned to the tropes that “make matter make sense.”[5] Laudable as that project may be, applying a magnifying lens to Lucretian literary materialism doesn’t suffice as an instrument for illuminating the period’s philosophy. Meeker clearly has an original perspective to offer on Enlightenment philosophy and literature, one that leads to genuinely illuminating interpretations of underappreciated works like *Thérèse philosophe* (no one will look at that novel as straight or simple pornography after reading Meeker’s chapter four). However, her insights are sometimes obscured by her excessive use of arcane terminology and ponderous formulations, and by her regrettable tendency to relegate important questions to her footnotes. At sixty-six pages, the notes take up almost a quarter of the book’s discussion, and almost all commentary on critical perspectives that diverge from her own is buried there—a method of stealth argumentation that makes reading the chapters more laborious than it should be. The basic problem of *Voluptuous Philosophy* is, however, its substance more than its style: although it does draw needed attention to the role of language and literature in materialism, it doesn’t prove that the drive toward enlightenment compelled French thinkers to disavow the voluptuous, nor to remove the body from philosophy and the reading process.

NOTES

[1] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium; Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Dalia Judovitz, *The Culture of the Body: Genealogies of Modernity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

[2] Nathalie Ferrand, *Livre et lecture dans les romans français du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 101-06.

[3] See Sylvain Auroux, “Condillac, inventeur d’un nouveau matérialisme,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 24 (1992), 153-63.

[4] See Jean Starobinski, “Le Philosophe, le géomètre, l’hybride,” *Poétique* 21 (1975), 8-23. This is a classic essay on the fusion of knowledge and pleasure in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* that is, unfortunately,

never mentioned in *Voluptuous Philosophy*.

[5] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (Autumn 2001), 1-22, quote on p. 6.

Anne Vila University of Wisconsin-Madison acvila@wisc.edu

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