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Denis Diderot: *Éléments de physiologie* (review)

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generated by the *affaire*. These writings are not easily found elsewhere, and it is convenient to have them brought together in one volume. However, although the annotations are helpful, the introductory section seems rather skimpy in some respects, and could usefully have been developed further. It is true, for example, that the 1752 *arrêt* did officially suppress the first two volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, but its effect on the enterprise was negligible at that stage. Again, the curious and ambiguous relationship between Voltaire and Palissot needs to be more fully elucidated than it is here; Voltaire was, after all, the only major *philosophe* who was not attacked in the play. Ferret should have pointed out, too, that the name of Rosalie, one of the female characters in the play, was borrowed directly from Diderot's *Le Fils naturel*, which Palissot had more than once gone out of his way to attack. It would have been helpful, finally, to refer the reader to the abbé Iraitl's *Querelles littéraires* (1761), which provides one of the earliest and clearest contemporary accounts of the animosity between the *philosophes* and their enemies. Despite these omissions, Ferret has rendered a valuable service to scholarship, and his work will be welcomed by anyone wishing to explore one of the more notable episodes in the history of French theatre of the Ancien Régime.

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DENIS DIDEROT: *Éléments de physiologie*. Texte établi, présenté et commenté par  
PAOLO QUINTILI. Paris, Champion, 2004. Hb €85.00.

Diderot's *Éléments de physiologie* is part textbook, part methodological statement and part reflection on the nature of living matter. As a comprehensive work written very late in the *philosophe's* career, it is also something of a swansong, drawing together ideas and information that had been a lifetime in the accumulation. Given this, it is rather surprising that *Éléments de physiologie* has attracted relatively little attention over the years, the only real explorations being those of Jean Mayer in 1964 and 1987. Now, however, Paolo Quintili presents us with a thorough and very scholarly edition of this important and under-appreciated work. At the core of Quintili's interpretation is Diderot's attempt to lay the groundwork for a materialist anthropology stressing the importance of medicine, not only to the maintenance of life, but to the very manner in which humanity regards itself. For Diderot, a view of humankind based upon the idealized constructs of metaphysics is to be supplanted by an altogether more practical assessment of human beings as they are; one concerned with issues of health, of organization and of balance. By way of achieving this goal, *Éléments de physiologie* provides a complete survey not only of all parts of the human body, but also the most up-to-date theories about how these parts work and interact. Diderot's preoccupation here is not so much with the details of anatomy, but with the 'big issues' of life in general, and of human life in particular. The most crucial aspects of the work are therefore those concerning the nature of living matter, the transformation of organic forms over time, generation and the brain. Quintili is alert to the essence of *Éléments de physiologie* in that the bulk of his extensive footnotes are devoted to the sections of the book that deal with these pivotal matters. His annotation adds a great deal to the text, and does a good

job of placing it within the context of both Diderot's own *œuvre* as well as broader, contemporary debates within the 'life sciences'. The editor's introduction is also immensely useful in that it paints a detailed picture of the philosophical landscape within which Diderot was operating, and offers a comprehensive overview of those thinkers that most deeply influenced his 'biological' thought, most notably Haller, Bordeu, Buffon and Maupertuis. The methodological and attentive nature of Quintili's approach may be best demonstrated, however, by the inclusion of a diagram that neatly highlights the seminal intellectual underpinnings of *Éléments de physiologie*, presenting them as a series of interconnected 'problem points'. Also of interest are the Appendices, which present fragmentary manuscript notes that allow the Diderot scholar to carefully trace the evolution of the thinker's ideas from *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* right through to the latter stages of his life. Quintili's edition is a well laid out and information-rich examination of Diderot's definitive statement on vitalism, materialism and the best means of understanding the nature of man. It will be invaluable to *diderotistes* and to students of eighteenth-century natural philosophy alike.

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*La Malédiction littéraire: du poète crotté au génie malheureux.* By PASCAL BRISSETTE. Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2005. 413 pp. Pb €31.00; Cdn \$34.95.

In this study, Pascal Brissette proposes both a prehistory and a case-based analysis of what he identifies as a cardinal myth of the autonomous literary field in France: that linking artistic virtue with personal suffering. 'Malheureux, donc légitime' (p. 39) is, for Brissette, the shared governing logic of the discourses to which this association gives rise. His articulation of the myth in terms of legitimacy announces the sociologically influenced perspective prevalent throughout a book that is not, however, as the Introduction makes clear, a primarily sociological study. After having argued for a general view of myth as an enabling hermeneutic device (providing an explicative schema that is both a compensatory mechanism and an impetus to action), Brissette proposes a history of the 'acceptability' of the myth he has identified through the study, as an evolving discursive system, of the abundant discourses of literary misfortune. The chronological and cultural boundaries of this complex object are necessarily problematic. In his first part, which sets out a prehistory of the myth proper where legitimizing discourses on melancholy, on poverty and on persecution are argued to converge on the subsequent topos of 'malheur'/'malédiction', Brissette draws on both classical and medieval sources before discussing representative cases (most but not all in French) from across the early modern period. Each of the three chapters devoted to these tributary discourses functions quite well as an autonomous outline of its particular affliction. Each cohere in their readings of representations of these evils as (unequally successful) attempts to establish symbolic capital, in which varieties of melancholy, poverty or persecution succeed one another as so many permutations of an already apparently implacable logic.

The critical moment in Brissette's construction of the myth is that of Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Rousseau becomes, both in his own right and in his