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Anne. C. Vila, *Suffering Scholars: Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. vii + 267 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4992-7.

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For humanities academics who have dutifully fulfilled tedious professional requirements, struggled through precarious employment situations, or sacrificed *les plus belles journées, leur argent et leur gaieté* hunched over works that provide all too varying degrees of pleasure, simply glancing at a title like *Suffering Scholars* elicits a strong reaction somewhere between delight, curiosity, identification and gratitude. Publishing in a context when scholars' very relevance is doubted on a regular basis--often by influential public figures--Vila and her editors astutely addressed the book to readers who "épuisent leur corps par des méditations forcées, et par des veilles de la nuit." [1] Marketing *brio* set aside, the book is by no means an opportunistic enterprise: set in the myriad interstices left in the thought edifices of scholars the likes of Azouvi, Heinich, Foucault, and Starobinski, it constitutes a precious document for understanding the fate of a cultural type in a period preceding the divorce of the medical arts and the humanities.

Plumbing the French Enlightenment's rich "medico-cultural dialogue" (p. 181) around the specificity of *gens de lettres*, Vila's study takes an interdisciplinary approach in "tell[ing] the story of how the bodily as well as moral exceptionalness of the learned was represented and debated" (p. 3-4). Quoting a fellow historian, she professes her desire to "put intellectuals back in their bodies" (p. 16), but does so with careful consideration in not deforming the epistemological underpinnings endogenous to eighteenth-century thought, when disciplinary divides were not as stark as they are today. "Quel médecin n'auroit pas honte d'ignorer l'histoire et les belles lettres?" writes the physician Tissot in the beginning of his *De la santé des gens de lettres*, a book that is the primary focal point of *Suffering Scholars*. [2] Much as Tissot interweaves his own ideas "with those of his medical contemporaries and notions that had been circulating since antiquity," incorporating "multiple examples of poets, painters, philosophers, mathematicians, statesmen, and physicians" (p. 34), Vila studies the literature devoted to the sicknesses of men of letters in a style that is itself quite reminiscent of the *médecins littérateurs*, incorporating bouts of "storytelling" (p. 34) and linking medical discourse to a network of correspondence, plays, novels, treatises, and encyclopedic entries. This approach, rather than being conducive to hotchpotch arbitrariness, instead boldly takes the necessary measures to converse equitably with the Enlightenment and its "dominant philosophical and medico-philosophical frameworks" (p. 17). How else but by being as faithful as possible to the diversity of their intellectual climate might one properly read "physicians [who] belonged to the Republic of Letters through their academic affiliations, their membership in medical and philosophical societies, their correspondence, and the fashionable circles they sometimes frequented"? (p. 23)

Instead of strictly prioritizing sociability or of favoring rigidly constructivist readings, Vila incorporates elements of both into what she refers to as “biologically grounded perspectives” (p. 17). The “storytelling” she engages in, roughly spanning a period “starting in the 1720s and running to about 1840” (p. 14), is sensitive to a shift in epistemological paradigms around an alleged “ineradicable chronological threshold”[3] that divides the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this regard, it rekindles a familiar Foucauldian narrative of the evolution of discourses on the body. One cannot help but compare Vila’s *Suffering Scholars* to a study that in large part shares its protagonists: the *Birth of the Clinic*. From the onset, Foucault delineates his examination by underlining the differences between two “gazes” as presented in two excerpts, the first, by Pierre Pomme (*Traité des affections vaporeuses des deux sexes*, 1769, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.) and the second, by Antoine Laurent Jessé Bayle (*Nouvelle doctrine des maladies mentales*, 1825). While the first carries “old myths of nervous pathology to their ultimate form”, the second speaks the language of medical rationality that we are still today accustomed to: “each of Bayle’s words, with its qualitative precision, directs our gaze into a world of constant visibility, while Pomme, lacking any perceptual base, speaks to us in the language of fantasy.”[4]

To prolong the “archaeology of thought” metaphor, we could say Foucault evaluates the distance between the Pomme/Bayle strata so as to ascertain a change in episteme, or, more poetically put, in the “silent configuration in which language finds support.” In doing so, however, he remains within the textual boundaries of an identified medical community, as if the development of its field had been neatly cleaved from that of the period’s other forms of inquiry. Concentrating her efforts on a single yet composite “cultural phenomenon known as *maladies des gens de lettres*” (p. 18) during the same period, Vila’s work offers a riveting counterpoint to Foucault’s narrative, bringing to light the profound interdependency of fields in their respective evolutions. If Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic* can be said to proceed as would an archaeologist digging vertically under a specific site, one might venture that Vila’s *Suffering Scholars* evokes the work of a seismologist investigating ripple effects, amplifications, attenuations and ramifications of a seism’s initial impulse. She charts out a network of discourses on the body stemming from the archetype of the sickly scholar as represented in Tissot’s *De la santé des gens de lettres*, thematically extending the idea to such wide-reaching yet pertinently connected subjects as the figure of the *philosophe* in stage productions, the self-fashioning of intellectuals and its recuperation by early alienists’ case studies, or Diderot’s attempts at “painting” the innerworkings of a “genius” in action. Accordingly, her work is invaluable to both students and more experienced researchers of the French eighteenth century alike. The former will discover a cogent and multifold community of thought via a theme they can identify with while the latter will find an erudite and refreshing displacement of gaze onto a neglected subject. She does much to nuance the birth of the French intellectual persona, too often glossed over as merely symptomatic of a nineteenth-century “cult of the thinker” and the glorifying of *grands hommes* as new saintly figures in freshly secularized European nations.

Evidently, like most books dealing with intellectual history, *Suffering Scholars* is more of a lovingly crafted object than an exhaustive enumeration of everything that deals with a surgically demarcated category. Nonetheless, Vila’s critical literature review is impressive in its rigor. The 54 pages of endnotes constitute a precious bibliographical resource unto themselves. More than the fruitlessly laconic or, conversely, tiringly rambling style of too many critical apparatuses, a great number of Vila’s notes bear witness to a serious curation effort; their style is reminiscent of

an answer a diligent thesis director might give cherished students looking for the most up-to-date reading on a new subject. She often comments on the works themselves within her endnotes, sometimes even anticipating where the readings she cites might lead to, as when after mentioning two articles by Starobinski and Azouvi to support her use of the expression “body consciousness”, she then suggests the reading of Xavier Martin’s *Regénérer l’espèce humaine* to those that might want further reading on “the period’s widespread insistence on the organic underpinnings of human nature” (p. 190, n. 77).

The care with which she compiles a helpful and concise critical apparatus is one of the reasons that make it difficult to separate Vila’s approach from her nearly thirty years’ experience as a professor in an American university, in other words as an educator whose word is regularly held up to the litmus test of her students’ interest. Another reason is her compositional style filled with anecdotes, humor and generous use of superlatives. The text is punctuated by appeals to the importance of the subject matter: “no thinker embodied the ambiguities of singularity more fully than Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (p. 130), for example. In much the same way, just as “no single text illustrates” the transformation of the word *philosophe* more than *Le Philosophe*, Villedieu’s *Les Amours des grands hommes* contributes “the most” to “the more sympathetic view of the amorous *philosophe*” (pp. 69-71). Wit abounds: we can clearly picture an engaged seminar room chuckling while Vila states that as the counterpart to female hysteria, male “hypochondria made it possible for turn-of-the-century *gens de lettres* to be nervous”, but “in a manly way” (p. 153). Her style does more than help with reading pleasure: it makes a more lasting impression in the minds of her readers than would a dryly declarative study. Not initially familiar with the intrigue of Destouches’ *Le Philosophe marié*, I now cannot forget the character and posterity of Ariste (the *philosophe*) and Finette’s (his wife) relationship after having read the following sentence: “Finette’s salty intimation that Ariste may not be able to rise to his conjugal duties, if he ever fully accepts them, would go on to provide grist for the mill of the ‘cerebro-genital pole’ theory popularized by the nineteenth-century medical author Julien-Joseph Virey, who cited Finette’s wisecrack to support his thesis that great intellectuals were tepid lovers and poor sires because their vital fluids were channeled toward the brain” (p. 74). Such dulcet and meticulous prose forces the mind to slow its pace, reread, and take delight in what it is assimilating: it hasn’t backtracked for lack of clarity, but rather to fully grasp the details of what it perceives as an ornate fresco. Since the rehabilitation of narrative in the writing of history by historians like Hayden White, Vila can certainly be counted among the rare academics who have heartily embraced an unapologetically “literary” or even oratorical style without forfeiting rigor.

If a revised edition of this work were to ever see the light of day, a chapter devoted to the material culture surrounding the sickly Enlightenment intellectual persona--perhaps even with a few illustrations--would definitely deepen readers’ understanding of how the period envisioned the body’s environment. Not that *every* book on the eighteenth century should necessarily incorporate material history, but it wouldn’t be out of place in one concerned with materiality and the corporeality of scholars. The epilogue’s passing remark on “purely body-based remedies” such as “*tisanes apéritives* to clear out their bowels”, wearing a “*garde-vue*” to protect eyes in the light and using a standing table “à la Tronchin” (p. 179) as well as Garnier’s recommendation that contemporary men of letters “revive the old custom of wearing a pallium to set themselves clearly apart from the social world” (p. 60) aroused interest that was met with little or no further development. Print culture and fine art could nourish such a study, perhaps

starting with some famous attributes of the *philosophes*: Voltaire's *canne*, Rousseau's *écritoire*, or perhaps a certain *vieille robe de chambre*...[5]

In closing--and at the risk of nitpicking--a word regarding the title of *Suffering Scholars*: its alluring alliteration doesn't provide a very neat translation of "*gens de lettres*." To be fair, short of using the French expression, one would be hard-pressed to find a perfect translation. In many ways, however, the etymological roots of "scholar" suggest a type that, at least at first glance, differs from the individual, singular free-thinkers denoted by "*gens de lettres*." The very beginning of Vila's introduction explains "*gens de lettres*" as the Enlightenment's "blanket term for *intellectuals*" (p. 3, my italics), not scholars. Indeed, the thinkers studied seemed opposed to the congregative frequenters of institutions or *schola*, voluntarily attached to a form of dogma. Of course, the term is certainly not outlandish--simply a little dissonant. Perhaps *Suffering Savants* might have been more appropriate, especially given many of the "cases" physicians and alienists referred to in illustrating the specificities of *gens de lettres* featured learned polymaths: Aristotle, Pascal, Rousseau, Voltaire, or de Staël. Tissot's very study professedly seeks to "saisir toutes les circonstances particulières, relatives à la santé, qui différencient l'état des Savans de celui des autres ordres de la société"[6]. Not to mention that the titles of Molière's *Femmes savantes* (1672) and Balzac's *Entre Savants* (1846), cited in Vila's study, support using the term over the period concerned. The modern acceptance of the word "savant"--a person affected with a developmental disorder who exhibits exceptional skill or brilliance in a given field--also carries the idea expressed in Rousseau's preface to *Narcisse* that "le travail de cabinet rend les hommes délicats, affaiblit leur temperament"[7]. However, using *savant* instead of *scholar* would likely have taken away from a phenomenon this review's introduction described: the pleasurable self-identificatory appeal of this study's title for modern scholars. In any case, it represents but a single word in what is by all means a brilliant, remarkable volume and an indispensable read for any scholar, student or savant of eighteenth-century ideas.

## NOTES

[1] Samuel-Auguste Tissot, *De la santé des gens de lettres* (Lausanne: Chez François Grasset, 1768), 15.

[2] In a perfectly timed manner, Vila and Ronan Chalmin released a French critical edition of this famous treatise earlier this year. See: Samuel-Auguste Tissot, *De la santé des gens de lettres* [1775, 3<sup>e</sup> éd.), Anne Vila and Ronan Chalmin (éd.) (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018).

[3] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, (Online: Routledge, 2003), 195.

[4] *Ibid.*, x.

[5] Daniel Roche's *La culture des apparences. Une histoire du vêtement XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, (Paris: Fayard, 1989)--especially its chapter on "Raison et santé vestimentaire"--comes to mind. However, focusing rather on the practices of large-scale socio-economic classes and discourses on clothes, Roche never centers his inquiry on appearance and material culture of a group itself responsible for many of the discourses he cites: *gens de lettres*. Posterity of an *imaginaire*

surrounding the Enlightenment is certainly impossible to distinguish from the objects and practices its intellectuals were associated with. “Pourquoi Rousseau n’a-t-il pas laissé son génie dans son Écritoire? Pourquoi la Canne de Voltaire n’a-t-elle point inspiré des tragédies comme *Mahomet* ?” writes Hyacinthe Decomberousse in the Avant-propos of his 1817 *La canne de Voltaire et l’écritoire de Rousseau, dialogue par de Montbrun*.

[6] Tissot, *De la santé des gens de lettres*, xiii.

[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Préface à *Narcisse ou l’Amant de lui-même*”(1752), cited in Tissot, *De la santé des gens de lettres*, 31.

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