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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.

Review essay by Joanna Stalnaker, Columbia University

My favorite sentence in Anne C. Vila's *Suffering Scholars* is one in which she aligns herself with the historian Christopher Forth in his effort to "put intellectuals back in their bodies" (p. 16). [1] This is a seemingly simple aim but one with profound intellectual and methodological consequences. As Vila observes, the tenacious prohibition of biography in literary studies — anchored by two influential essays, Marcel Proust's "Contre Sainte-Beuve" and Michel Foucault's "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" — has made it impossible for us to recognize that Enlightenment thinkers were not just thinkers (p. 19). In treating bodies as discursive sign systems, we have overlooked the fact that the *philosophes* "felt, ate, moved about in space (or failed to do so), got older, fell ill, and eventually died" (p. 17). Indeed, we have ignored the lessons of the Enlightenment itself, forgetting Diderot's joke in the *Rêve de d'Alembert* about men turning into heads due to the over-exertion of their mental faculties (or men turning into otherwise-headed entities due to the over-exertion of their amorous desires). It is only by reintroducing "living, feeling, laboring, sometimes suffering" bodies into the equation that we can grasp the fine seam that stitched intellectual work to what Alain Corbin eloquently calls "the murmuring of the viscera" (p. 188). [2] And it is only by "cross[ing] the author/work barrier once held to be impermeable" that we can understand the phenomenon Vila uncovers in her book: the ways that men of letters were pathologized in Enlightenment France (p. 19). [3]

This intellectual and methodological revolution would be welcome for any historical period (and indeed Vila quotes a historian of the Dreyfus Affair in describing the aim of her study), but it is especially vital for the eighteenth century. This was a period when medical doctors like Théophile de Bordeu, immortalized in the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, were given pride of place among philosophers. It was a period when *philosophes*, including Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, devoted as much or more space in their correspondence to detailing their bodily ailments as they did to expounding their ideas. It is not by accident that Michel de Montaigne, whose last essay "De l'expérience" made the minutiae of his bodily habits and preferences integral to the depiction of his ever-active mind, was so admired in the eighteenth century, by writers as diverse as Diderot and Marie Anne de Vichy-Chamrond, marquise du Deffand, the consummate letter writer of her age. Diderot's last work, the unfinished *Éléments de physiologie*, was a compendium of existing knowledge of the human body, with a central section devoted to the brain. He, like Montaigne, used visceral metaphors to describe the workings of the brain and to remind his readers that it was seated in the body. And neither Diderot's nor Montaigne's imagery should be deemed superfluous: as Kate E. Tunstall has observed of early modern debates surrounding embodied cognition, "the texts that engage with or mobilize the claim that the body is sufficient for cognitive activity are particularly dense in imagery." [4] Tunstall's analysis, along with her broader body of scholarly work, make a compelling case that any effort to restore the body to its rightful place in eighteenth-century studies

must also attend to the literary language and forms that set eighteenth-century philosophy apart from so much of the Anglo-American analytical tradition. [5]

It should already be apparent that I applaud Vila's effort to reintroduce the body and biography back into our study of the eighteenth century. This effort is long overdue and Vila is an eloquent and deeply informed advocate for it. Indeed, her important first book, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France*, already lay the groundwork for the transformation she is now calling for more explicitly. [6] The question I would like to raise here is to what extent she realizes her simply stated but in fact remarkably ambitious goal in *Suffering Scholars*. In keeping with my characterization of Tunstall's work, I would like to raise this question on two levels. First, to what extent do the living, breathing, suffering bodies of Enlightenment writers — as perceived on the basis of textual sources, of course — play a starring role in *Suffering Scholars*? And second, to what extent does Vila attend to the corporeality of literary language and form that Tunstall's work encourages us to take into account when considering the body itself?

One of the most exciting things about Vila's book is the way it gestures towards new textual sources that could help us to restore the body to its rightful place in eighteenth-century studies. At several points in her book, Vila notes that the discursive basis of eighteenth-century medicine is to be found not just in published treatises but above all in epistolary correspondences, like the one between Samuel-Auguste Tissot and Johann-Georg Zimmermann, two doctors who met only once in person but each of whom "craft[ed] pathologies of the other" on the basis of their forty-year correspondence (p. 44). Yet aside from a few passing references to this correspondence and a handful of others, Vila ends up paying surprisingly little attention to correspondence in her book. Her discussion of the brilliant correspondence between Voltaire and Deffand, for example, is hampered by a reliance on secondary sources (Deffand does not appear in the bibliography of primary sources) (p. 98). This is unfortunate because Deffand was one of the most eloquent chroniclers of the condition of *ennui*, an illness tied to vapors and often attributed to men and women of letters. And yet despite her position as an eminent salon hostess and the admiration her letters elicited in Voltaire among others, Deffand did not consider herself a woman of letters, much less a *philosophe*. She could thus have provided an interesting test case for Vila's discussion of gender and the differing reactions of men and women of letters to the pathologization of their kind (pp. 12-14). How much does the self-perception of one's identity as a man or woman of letters affect the experience of illnesses typically attributed to those roles?

The question of gender also ends up playing a relatively minor role in Vila's book, perhaps because of the kinds of sources she tends to privilege (medical and philosophical discourse and consecrated literary works, as opposed to correspondence). Although she does not gloss over "the period's larger, generally masculinist assumptions regarding the pursuit and production of knowledge," Vila opens her brief discussion of gender in her introduction with the counter-intuitive claim that *gens de lettres* was "a gender-neutral term" in eighteenth-century France. Technically speaking, this is true, but one has only to read Voltaire's *Encyclopédie* article "Gens de lettres," or the introduction to Tissot's *De la santé des gens de lettres* to see that in its usage *gens de lettres* was anything but gender-neutral and referred almost exclusively to men. In fact, Voltaire makes no distinction whatsoever in his *Encyclopédie* article (later included in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*) between the phrases *gens de lettres* and *hommes de lettres*. This terminological

quibble might seem minor, but it points to a larger underlying issue: to what extent does Vila's choice of textual sources and figures reproduce the masculinist assumptions of the period under study? This question came to mind for me when Vila noted in passing that the nineteenth-century doctor Joseph-Henri Réveillé-Parise had mainly men in mind when he lauded the heroic labors of scholars, "but he also included a few exceptional women, like Germaine de Staël, in this pantheon" (p. 13). Perhaps not coincidentally, Germaine de Staël is the only woman whose writings receive a sustained reading in *Suffering Scholars*. And the novel under discussion, *Corinne*, depicts its titular character as a highly exceptional female genius, analogous to de Staël herself. Now I have no objection to the choice of de Staël, but the focus on this singular female figure to the exclusion of others seems to confirm both de Staël's self-perception of herself as an exceptional woman and her pantheonization by male writers like Réveillé-Parise. To return to the example of Deffand, what about women who wrote and exerted their minds strenuously, but who have not traditionally been included in the pantheons of their day or our own? In cases where they suffered from maladies attributed to *gens de lettres* and devoted considerable attention to writing about them, it seems like a valuable occasion to expand the corpus and consider how societal definitions and self-conceptions of intellectual work interact with medical diagnoses and personal suffering. In short, I would have liked to see more sustained discussion of what *women* of letters "thought about bodies, including their own" (p. 17).

This opens out onto a larger question of the category of the "scholar" or "intellectual" that underpins Vila's study. Because I think of the term "intellectual" as anachronistic for the period under study (it seems to have emerged as a noun only in the late nineteenth century), I found myself wondering about the broad variety of terms Vila uses more or less interchangeably in her book: *gens de lettres*, intellectuals, cerebralists, intelligentsia, scholars, geniuses, thinkers, poets, artists, the learned, knowledge seekers, *hommes d'esprit*, *philosophes*, the studious, *savants*. Although Vila pays attention to the specificity of the term *philosophe*, she does not directly address a question I kept wondering about as she jumped around among these terms: How well do these various terms map out onto one group of people? Are there not important distinctions to be made within this constellation of identities, notably between the *savant* or scholar, on the one hand, and the artist or poet, on the other? Vila's reading of a dizzying array of sources seems to suggest that there are not: prior to the end of the century with the Idéologue school, "the discourse on intellectual pathologies had a leveling quality: it applied not just to philosophical, scientific, and literary luminaries but also the 'pauvres diables' who had to write for a living, and to failed aspirants to intellectual celebrity" (pp. 24-25). Yet this seems like a more important point than Vila makes of it: I kept wishing that she would tackle head on the problem of how figures who come to seem so distinct in the nineteenth century (i.e., the *savant* vs. the poet) could have been lumped together in this earlier period. The terminological question also brings us back to the problem of gender: On what basis should we determine who were the *gens de lettres* or intellectuals of a given period? Vila takes her distance from Dena Goodman's argument that eighteenth-century salon hostesses were engaged in the intellectual project of the Enlightenment, referring to "the limits of the historical narrative that views sociability as the main structuring value of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters" (p. 50). [7] Instead, she allies herself with the more recent account of the salons put forth by Antoine Lilti, concurring with him that "eighteenth-century Parisian salons were not necessarily literary or intellectual venues: they were, above, all, 'the social spaces of elite leisure ... deeply rooted in court society'" (p. 51). [8] Yet in doing so, she overlooks the opinions of some of the very writers who feature most prominently in her book, notably Voltaire, who

claimed that Deffand's rightful place was as *chef de file* of the *philosophes*, and that her philosophy, if only she would write it down, would be superior to that of her male contemporaries. [9] Vila also overlooks figures like Suzanne Curchod Necker, de Staël's mother, whose morbid obsession with premature burial surely bears some relation to the kinds of maladies attributed to superior minds in the period. These are missed opportunities for a richer and more variegated picture of the pathologies to which *gens de lettres* — both men and women — were subject.

Vila is at her most brilliant when analyzing medical and philosophical discourse and inscribing her textual readings into a deep and intricate sense of historical context. To cite just two among many such moments of virtuosity in her book, consider her nuanced treatment of sentimentalism. Vila writes that “the effusive style of emotional expression typically associated with sentimentalism coexisted with very different affective styles,” a statement that reconfigures the way we think about sentimentalism in the period (p. 50). In yet another instance, her contextualized re-reading of a key passage from Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, on the metaphor of the *tableau mouvant*, offers a refreshing new take on Diderot's view of mental operations. Where Vila is perhaps less successful is in some of her more properly literary readings. Whereas her analysis of medical texts and philosophical treatises is anything but flattening, her readings of works like Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, Marivaux's *Triomphe de l'amour* and Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau* seem to skirt over the complex problems of literary form, genre and language in favor of a singular expository or discursive message.

Vila has set the bar very high, for herself and for scholars who seek to pursue the ambitious program she has laid out for eighteenth-century studies. It takes quite a bit of intellectual courage and nuance to introduce “more biologically grounded perspectives on the body” into the study of eighteenth-century texts, and Vila has realized that goal brilliantly (p. 17). My hope going forward is that her project to “put intellectuals back in their bodies” will be combined with Tunstall's model of a closer and deeper attention to what I see as the literary analogue of the body in eighteenth-century texts: literary form, genre, imagery and language. That would be no small feat but Vila has pointed the way forward.

NOTES

[1] The phrase is a quotation from Christopher Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 13.

[2] Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire and Horror: Toward a History of the Senses*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1995), 185.

[3] I have chosen to use the gender specific term ‘men of letters’ consciously. I will address this usage and the place of gender in Vila's analysis later in the review.

[4] Kate E. Tunstall, “The Early Modern Embodied Mind and the Entomological Imaginary,” in Mary Helen McMurrin and Alison Conway eds., *Mind, Body, Motion, Matter: Eighteenth-Century British and French Literary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 202.

[5] Among other important essays, see Kate E. Tunstall, “Eyes Wide Shut: *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*,” in James Fowler ed., *New Essays on Diderot* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 141-157.

[6] Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

[7] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[8] The quotation is from Antoine Lilti, “The Kingdom of Politesse: Salons and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *Republic of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1:1 (2008), p. 1, <http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/kingdom-politesse-salons-and-republic-letters-eighteenth-century-paris>. See also Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

[9] Joanna Stalnaker, “Madame du Deffand ou la retraite impossible,” in Marine Roussillon, Sylvaine Guyot, Dominic Glynn and Marie-Madeleine Fragonard eds., *Littéraire: Pour Alain Viala*, vol. 2 (Arras, France: Artois Presses Université, 2018): 307-319.

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