

The Department of French & Italian presents

The Evolving Definition of Man: Lamarck's Natural Philosophy and Literary Legacy

A Dissertation Defense by

Erin Myers

3:00pm

September 21st, 2018

Room 10

School of Public Health

If you'd like to attend, please
contact the chair:

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Sand Worm Casting, Cape Hillsboro National Park, Australia. Judith Boice.

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Ordering the collections of worms and insects at the Muséum National d'histoire naturelle led Jean-Baptiste Lamarck to believe that the great diversity of plants and animals was due to gradual changes over a long period of time, accumulated in living bodies of increasing complexity. This theory is recognizable as an early account of evolution. But there is more that is unfamiliar: animals harnessed an atmospheric element which, by its direct action upon animal tissues, produced a nervous system and ultimately an organ of intelligence. The latter part of this process hinges on the existence of an origin-destination of sensation, Lamarck's *sentiment intérieur*. This "power" is key to Lamarck's 1817 dictionary definition of humankind. His solution to the "insurmountable hiatus" between the physical and moral facts of human experience is situated – historically, textually, culturally – in a moment of transition between worlds and genres.

My dissertation examines the possibilities and constraints of the natural history genre which Lamarck inherited from Georges-Louis-Leclerc, comte de Buffon (Chapter 1). Through close readings, I identify rhetorical strategies that are constitutive of their natural philosophies. Next, I survey uses of the *sentiment intérieur* in works of various genres, especially from 1700-1850, when its purchase rivaled that of conscience (consciousness, conscience) (Chapter 2). I expose trends in thinking about the source (s) of spontaneous action in nature among Lamarck's predecessors and contemporaries, especially the *Idéologues*. Finally, I analyze three novels to determine Lamarck's immediate influence in French literature (Chapter 3). Henri Beyle (Stendhal), Honoré de Balzac, and Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve grappled with the analysis of ideas (*idéologie*), and their semi-autobiographical protagonists likewise search for the seat of consciousness. Their encounters with nature-as-narrator in "Lamarckian moments" describe the perils and potentials of the life of the mind.