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.