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# UTOPIA'S GARDEN

FRENCH NATURAL HISTORY FROM  
OLD REGIME TO REVOLUTION



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it." The therapeutic value of Mesmerism, like electricity, therefore, lay in its ability to stimulate animal heat in people. This was the assimilation of the eighteenth-century electrical body to a long tradition of climatic medicine derived from the ancients, and underpinning the past half-century of natural historical inquiry. But above all, this report related physical and moral causes and their effects very directly to the world's active principle—be it manifested as electricity or animal heat—which circulated throughout the economy of nature, from sky to plant to animal to atmosphere, and between individual humans. In prerevolutionary France atmospheres were not merely hazardous to health, they were what bound members together in a society, determined their physical and moral qualities, and tied them to the economy of nature. The cohesion of society itself was at stake in the improvement of the air.

De Jussieu's use of electricity as the mediator for moral/physical interactions was thus not unusual in the 1780s. But his world fluid resembled the universal Mesmeric fluid in many ways. Moreover, his account was taken up by the radical Jean-Louis Carra as the basis for his revolutionary political theory, as described by Darnton: "Moral causes, like unjust legislation, disrupted one's atmosphere and hence one's health, just as physical causes produced sickness; and conversely, physical causes could produce moral effects, even on a broad scale. 'The same effects take place, every moment, in society; and one has not yet ventured to acknowledge their importance, I believe, because one has not yet sufficiently connected the moral to the physical.'"<sup>129</sup> The investigation of that connection between the moral and the physical within the economy of nature characterized much of the activity of savants during the Revolution. In addition, the economy of nature became increasingly important as a site of scientific investigation during the Revolution. In 1792 the Académie des Sciences proposed as its prize essay competition the topic of the economy of nature, since "it was time that the attention of savants was fixed on the solution of this great problem." "By what processes," it asked, "does nature operate this circulation between the three kingdoms? . . . The cause and mode of the phenomena have, up to now, been enveloped in an almost impenetrable veil."<sup>130</sup>

At the new Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, the concern to investigate the moral-physical relationship manifested itself in public dissections, such as Mertrud's dissection of the Versailles rhinoceros on September 26, 1793, before the members of the Comité de Salut Public. A detailed

129 Darnton, *Mesmerism*, 108, quoting from Carra.

130 "Prix propose par l'Académie des sciences, pour l'année 1794," *Journal d'Histoire naturelle* 1 (1792): 467–469.

account of this, including a brief description of its *moeurs* by Daubenton, survives in manuscript.<sup>131</sup> The study of animal *moeurs* was also more actively advocated by naturalists during the Revolution, and received considerable state support. In 1791 Pinel's "Recherches à faire par les voyageurs pour concourir efficacement aux progrès de la zoologie," a memoir written for the Société d'Histoire Naturelle when its members were engaged in deciding how to instruct the voyagers traveling in search of Lapérouse, lamented the inadequacy of naturalists' knowledge of varieties, "an object of natural history which can as yet only be sketched." Pinel's zoology was to be "anthropocentric" in the same way that Buffon's had been twenty or thirty years before: namely, the investigations of zoologists were to contribute to understanding the effects of climate on man. Above all, he appealed for travelers to "note with care all that can exert a more or less powerful influence" upon species, such as "the position of places, their temperature, the variations of the seasons, the qualities of the soil or the inequalities which can make them Low or Mountainous, the principal vegetable productions which grow there naturally, the Nature of the foodstuffs that result from them for animals and man, the more or less savage and rustic state of the latter and the more or less advanced state of civilization of the individuals of the human species."<sup>132</sup> Such an inquiry would transform the practice of natural history, in Pinel's view. The Société d'Histoire Naturelle's report to the Assemblée Nationale on the Lapérouse expedition similarly stressed the importance of examining the effects of climate.<sup>133</sup>

Prior to becoming intendant of the Jardin for six months in 1793, the writer Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre had already attracted attention with a proposal for a menagerie to be established at the Jardin.<sup>134</sup> Aubin-Louis Millin, Pinel, and Alexandre Brongniart wrote a favorable report on his memoir of 1792 to the Société d'Histoire Naturelle.<sup>135</sup> However, the menagerie came into being only in 1794. The

131 BCMHN, MS 219. The animal had died three days earlier and smelt appalling, but "anatomists are used to it" (L. C. Rookmaaker, "Histoire du rhinoceros de Versailles, 1770–1793," *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 36 [1983]: 307–318).

132 AN, AJ/15/565; Pinel, "Recherches," [1790–1791].

133 AN, AJ/15/565; "Observations générales de la Société d'Histoire naturelle sur le voyage à entreprendre pour aller à La Rochelle de Mr. de La Peyrouse," [1790–1791].

134 AN, AJ/15/512, piece 573; "Mémoire sur la nécessité de joindre une ménagerie au Jardin National des Plantes de Paris par Jacques Bernardin Henri de Saint-Pierre [sic]," [1792]. See the discussion in Masumi Inoue, "Le Vau's Menagerie and the Rise of the Animalier: Enclosing, Dissecting, and Representing the Animal in Early Modern France" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1994), 193–202.

135 AN, AJ/15/512, piece 572; "Rapport fait à la Société d'Histoire Naturelle de Paris, sur la nécessité d'établir une ménagerie; par A. L. Millin, Pinel et Alex. Brongniart," Paris, Decem-