

Matières incandescentes: problématiques matérialistes des Lumières françaises (1650-1780). By PIERRE BERTHIAUME. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal. 2014. 329 pp. €36. ISBN 978-2-7606-3340-7.

Pierre Berthiaume's *Matières incandescentes* provides a useful survey of the key issues and driving concepts that informed a materialist understanding of man and the world in the Eighteenth century. Strongly positioned against a teleological reading of reason, it argues that Enlightenment materialism does not come into a unified discourse but as a nexus of conflicting propositions born out of Theological criticism, and rejuvenated by the evolving life sciences, including medicine and natural history. As such its constructive move cannot be understood without reference to its *pars destruens*: the Revelation undermined, the Bible ridiculed, the miracles and prophecies unmasked, and God's existence negated. These propositions are not new and the anonymous treatise *Theophrastus redivivus* is proof that many of the doctrines that would be associated with materialism in the Enlightenment were already held in 1659. Despite the chronological span indicated in its title, however, *Matières incandescentes* is very much a book about texts published between 1750 and 1780 – with Diderot's *Eléments de physiologie* acting as *terminus ad quem*. The first two chapters, entitled 'Avoir raison de Dieu' and 'Théofascisme', cover the arguments held to prove that God does not exist and that religions are man-made impostures feeding on credulity and fear. Calling on the network of clandestine writings, as well as on thinkers such as Spinoza, d'Holbach, Du Marsais or Meslier, they list the materialist propositions that helped to evict God from the Creation, thus freeing the space for an eternal and autonomous matter. The third chapter, entitled 'Mobilis materiae', starts with Meslier's argument for the eternity of matter, which overthrows Descartes's theory of eternal (necessary) truths, and emphasises the importance of Newtonian physics in the shaping of a new empirical understanding of matter. The chapter also explores more speculative outgrowths, such as *Le Newtonianisme pour les dames*, and includes a useful discussion of movement as understood by Toland, La Mettrie and d'Holbach. The fourth chapter, entitled 'Materia actuosa', comes back to the problem of the creation of the world and analyses four arguments in favour of a self-organized matter that were put forward at the time: Meslier's theory of 'frayage' (facilitation); the probability theory via Cyrano, Lamy and Diderot; the infinite whole of Toland, and d'Holbach's 'grand tout'; and the transformist theory as explored by Benoît de Maillet, Buffon, Maupertuis, Diderot and d'Holbach. The fifth chapter, entitled 'Le corps de l'âme', explores iatro-mechanistic understandings of the body by physicians such as Hoffmann and Boerhaave, and explains how the latter was read by La Mettrie. It also usefully goes back to earlier conceptualisations of the corporeal origins of movement and feeling, thus exploring Gassendi's atoms and Leibniz's monads, before addressing the issues raised by the works of Maupertuis, Needham, Buffon, Glisson, Baglivi, Haller, and Ménéuret de Chambaud. The sixth chapter, entitled 'L'Âme matérielle', shows that quarrels about the immateriality of the soul are one of the main legacies of Cartesian philosophy. It also explores the scandalous paradox of thinking matter thanks to a corpus of heterodox texts originating from a variety of intellectual *milieux*. The seventh chapter, entitled 'Matière à fictions', concentrates on the psychic activity of the brain as understood by La Mettrie, Diderot and d'Holbach. Readers will appreciate the speculative dimension of representations that borrowed from the life sciences a multiplicity of images and fictions, but perhaps balk at the author's denigration (in the conclusion) of the insufficiencies of Eighteenth-century materialism.

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