

## *A Dialogue with La Mettrie*

Since thought visibly develops with our organs, why should not the matter of which they are composed be susceptible of remorse also, when once it has acquired, with time, the faculty of feeling?

—LA METTRIE, *Man a Machine* (Leyden, 1748)

Where does one look  
To purify the remark of an ancient  
Cynic? I am afraid not  
To the Eighteenth Century  
Or the mechanist La Mettrie,  
If he is one, for here  
The ambiguity

Begins. Let me explain.  
The ancient has us build on  
Supposed Plato's supposed  
Definition, Man is twolegged  
And without any feathers: add,  
To tell him from the plucked bird,  
His nails are flat.

Now this idea of the dog  
Diogenes, shook me. But,  
Let me say, no more so  
Than the mind of La Mettrie.  
I think we are not mushrooms  
Swollen for a day, nor even  
"Flowers bordering a ditch."

And I want a violent leap  
Beyond the dog. Do not  
Tell me from him as you mark  
The ape by his more intelligent  
Face. For once there was  
A blurred and giddy light  
In my enormous eyes.

A few more wheels, a few  
More springs than in,  
Say, your better animal?  
And with a closer heart  
To fill the brain with blood  
And start the delicate moral  
Hum in the anxious matter.

Suppose I agree the soul is  
An engine, admit Descartes  
And the rest never *saw*  
Their pair of things—never,  
As you say, counted them;  
Then here's the ambiguity,  
And a further problem:

You say you find an inner  
Force in bodies, and watch  
The smallest fibre turn  
Upon an inner rule.  
Now I don't see that this  
Is such a clear machine.  
In fact I think I wish

It were! For I have seen  
Your evidence. I don't forget  
Your newly dead  
And opened criminal  
Whose still hot heart  
Beats like the muscles in the face  
Of the severed head.

I don't forget you say  
The flesh of bats  
Palpitates in death,  
And even more of snakes,  
That never sweat. "Why then  
Do men boast moral  
Acts, that hang on these?"

Besides, injected warm  
Water animates the heart;  
The hearts of frogs move  
If put in the sun or if the heart  
Is placed upon a hot  
Table or a stone. If it stops,  
It may be poked, or bathed.

And Harvey noted this  
In toads. (The great physician,  
I could add, once  
Professionally cut a toad  
A burnt witch had kept  
For her familiar,  
And found it puffed with milk.)

A piece of a pigeon's heart,  
Lord Boyle has shown, beats  
As the whole one did—  
Mark this it is these same  
Motions twist in eels,  
In spiders or in the tiny  
Hands sliced from moles.

Lastly Bacon of Verulam  
Tells in his *Book of Spears*  
The case of the traitor caught  
And opened alive: his heart  
In a pan of boiling water  
Leaped several times  
To a perpendicular.

Height of two feet.  
Let us then conclude  
Boldly! Man is a machine.  
And there is no other thing  
Underneath. Except I believe  
Ambiguity, with its hope  
Or its ancient agony;

For to what do we look  
To purify his remarks, or purge  
His animal images? What  
Piece in us may be cut free  
Of the grievéd matter of La Mettrie,  
That underneath a temporal reeling  
*Took on this arch of feeling.*

JOHN LOGAN