

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