

The Death of La Mettrie (A Materialist Death?) *

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Julien Offray de La Mettrie, the great, scandalous materialist philosopher and medical doctor, author most famously of *L'Homme-Machine* (*Man a Machine*), was born in Saint-Malo (Brittany) on December 19th, 1709. He studied at the Collège d'Harcourt, and then, after some lazy years, obtained the diplomas of *bachelier*, *licence* and *docteur* in medicine from the faculty at Rheims ... all in the same year! During his service as a physician to the Royal Guards he was stricken with a "fièvre chaude," which led him to the 'revelation' that mental states were determined by, or at least coeval with, physical states: there is nothing about the soul that cannot be explained by inquiring into the body.

After publishing a series of medical works on topics such as vertigo, venereal disease, and dysentery, as well as translations of Boerhaave, with whom he studied in Leyden, he began to take a more polemical tone, publishing pamphlets such as *Saint Côme vengé*, *La Faculté vengée ou Les charlatans démasqués*, and the more ambitious 'political critique of medicine', *L'Ouvrage de Pénélope ou Machiavel en médecine*, to which can be added the shorter satire, *Politique du médecin de Machiavel ou le chemin de la fortune ouvert aux médecins*, which presents itself as the translation of a Chinese work by "Dr Fum Ho Ham" containing "portraits of the most famous doctors of Peking."

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The hostility of the corporation of real, Parisian doctors forced him to flee (leaving wife and children behind, and acquiring a loyal mistress), first to Holland, where he published the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, then, after a new uproar following the publication of *L'Homme-Machine* in 1748, to the court of Frederick II at Potsdam, where he found refuge until his untimely death on November 11th, 1751.

This has been described as a “materialist death”: at a banquet dinner at Mylord Tyrconnel’s, the French Ambassador to Frederick’s court, La Mettrie is said to have consumed too much of a *pâté de faisan truffé*, a pheasant pasty filled with truffles. The nature of this “pâté” itself has been much debated; Voltaire even turns it into a “pâté d’aigle, déguisé en faisan, bien farci de mauvais lard, de hachis de porc et de gingembre.” At first he felt “heavy” after the meal and suggested a game of billiards, but was taken with great pains and was put to bed at Tyrconnel’s. He refused the care of other doctors whom he called charlatans, and insisting on self-medicating himself by blood-letting and baths. He died approximately two days later of what is often thought of as food poisoning but may be, according to R. Boissier, “enteropathy, appendicitis, peritonitis, volvulus or obstruction.” There were also rumors of real poisoning. For instance, Pierre Pénisson, in an article entitled “La Mettrie à Berlin,” describes the ideological conflicts within the Berlin Academy of Sciences and also within Frederick’s court at Sans-Souci itself. Maupertuis tried to defend his fellow *malouin* La Mettrie; but the ‘anti-Enlightenment’ philosopher Formey and the court physician, Cothenius, had a vehement hatred for his materialist ideas. Thus Pénisson feels that, far from his native land, in a court suffused with an atmosphere of violence (more guns than books, as many witnesses described; Grimm told Diderot how he never arrived at Sans-Souci without shivers going down his back), “l’hypothèse d’un empoisonnement criminel n’est pas à exclure.”¹

¹ Pénisson, “La Mettrie à Berlin,” in Jean-Claude Bourdin, Francine Markovits *et al.*, dir., *Matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle. La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach* (Paris, 2006). His main source

This 'death by eating' confirmed the bad reputation La Mettrie had due to his writing, and it earned him much opprobrium and infamy, from his day until the present. There was great debate as to whether he died as a Christian or a philosopher, but the more reliable sources opted for the latter scenario. Voltaire dashed off several letters in the following days, some regretful, some sarcastic, but even his most sympathetic *post mortem* comment declares that Mr. Machine died out of "vanity": "Ce La Mettrie, cet Homme-Machine, ce jeune médecin, cette vigoureuse santé, cette vigoureuse imagination, tout cela vient de mourir, pour avoir mangé par vanité, tout un pâté de faisan aux truffes."² A Protestant author of a history of French literature from the mid-nineteenth century described him as a "métaphysicien lubrique de la volupté"³ (a sleazy metaphysician of pleasure, one might translate today); the naturalist Réaumur calls him a monster and regrets that he died 'in the horizontal position'⁴, and in a work published in 1969, another author describes his work as a "cynical appeal to gluttony, to libation, to the complete plenitude of the belly."⁵ More shocking however, is that even such kindred spirits as Diderot declared that he "died as he had to die, a victim of his own intemperance and madness; he killed himself by his ignorance of his professed art."⁶ It is only quite recently that we have begun to see, if not the circumstances of his death, at least *L'Homme-Machine*, in a different light.

La Mettrie's sense of irony but also of melancholia led him to identify himself with the man-machine (e.g. in the *Épître à Mlle A.C.P. ou la machine terrassée*); this indicates that beneath a rather Rabelaisian appearance (materialism, hedonism, and death by pheasant-truffle pasty), he may have

is Dieudonné Thiébaud, *Frédéric le Grand, sa famille, sa cour, son gouvernement, son académie, ses écoles et ses amis ... ou Mes souvenirs de vingt ans de séjour à Berlin* (Paris, 1827), p. 86.

² Voltaire, letter to Richelieu of November 13th, 1751, two days after La Mettrie's death.

³ Sayous, *Histoire de la littérature française à l'étranger* (1853), cit. D. Leduc-Fayette, "Le 'cas' La Mettrie," in *Images au XIXe siècle du matérialisme du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1979), p. 108.

⁴ letter to Formey, December 3^d, 1751.

⁵ Leon Velluz, *Maupertuis* (1969), p. 112.

⁶ *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, II, 6, in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. L. Versini (Paris, 1994), p. 1119.

possessed a more Falstaffian quality: as Voltaire said of him, “en vérité il ne faut jurer de rien sur l’apparence.” This apparently remorseless, pleasure-seeking, festive man who, according to one anecdote from Frederick’s court, when he had no money liked to stand naked in the middle of his room, slapping his buttocks and happily crying out “je n’ai point d’argent, bravo, je n’ai point d’argent,”⁷ was actually quite sad: “cet homme si gai et qui passe pour rire de tout, pleure quelquefois comme un enfant, d’être ici.”⁸ He declares it himself:

Qu’on ne me reproche donc plus d’avoir toujours vu belle & bonne compagnie, d’avoir été galant, homme de plaisir ... car c’est à ces Ecoles que je me suis formé le goût. ... Entre la gaieté & la tristesse, qui n’a pas éprouvé combien est mince la barrière que la Nature y a mise ? ... Tout gai que je suis, même en exil, dans une solitude et un ennui mortel pour tout autre, je puis donc devenir triste, mélancolique, hypocondriaque ... Peut-on mieux se guérir, que de s’empêcher d’être malade ?⁹

With the death of any philosopher, one is entitled to ask if their work somehow prepared the way for this event – if the physical event is at the same time emblematic of an *œuvre*. One can ask if the work of the author contains something like a teaching concerning death. In this case, not only is La Mettrie’s man-machine model suffused with a rather Kafkian blend of dark humour and melancholia, but his ‘moral philosophy’ contains a critique of the Stoic “lepers without feelings” who think of life as a process of steeling oneself against fears, blows, and death. In a universe that is entirely alive, on a Lucretian earth which is like a fertile mother producing ever-more offspring, it is at best pointless, and at worst life-denying, to conceive of philosophy or ethics as ‘preparation for dying’. Despite this, he also claims that at the moment of death one should not have fears concerning an after-life that does not exist, but instead be courageous like a Stoic. His anti-Stoicism belongs to a more general anti-asceticism, which leads him to speak of a “metaphysics of tenderness,”¹⁰ including a hedonistic

⁷ Henri de Catt, *Unterhaltungen mit Friedrich dem Grossen, Memoiren und Tagebücher*, hrsg. R. Koser (Leipzig, 1884), p. 20, cit. in R. Pomeau, *La religion de Voltaire* (Paris, 1969), p. 281.

⁸ Voltaire, letter to Mme Denis, September 2nd, 1751.

⁹ *Ouvrage de Pénélope* (Berlin, 1749-1750), vol. 2, pp. 124-126.

¹⁰ *La volupté*, in *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, p. 114.

ethics. If the doctor is better suited to treat matters of life and death than the philosopher, and medicine shows that any kind of prescriptive ethics is doomed to fail, since we are at the mercy of the “blood” which flows in our veins, then our happiness is not dependent on our conformity with a teaching but with the inclinations of our organism: “Vautre-toi comme les porcs, tu seras heureux comme les porcs.”¹¹ Yet swinish pleasure is still inferior to the more reflexive forms of pleasure or *volupté*: “La volupté est peut-être aussi différente de la débauche que la vertu l’est du crime.”¹²

More irrationally, one can also look to see if there are moments in the work which somehow prefigure the death. La Mettrie’s major philosophical and medical works do not offer any such examples, but the satirical play “La faculté vengée” contains a strange comment. The character who stands for La Mettrie, Chat-Huant, is attempting to defend himself against the charges of a jury of doctors, in the presence of the god Pluto, who appears to be quite sympathetic towards him. Speaking of the possible punishment, Pluto says “l’Exil suffit, et le Criminel ne sera nourri que de fromages et de canards.”¹³ Granted, a duck is not a pheasant. But there is something about this absurdly rich diet – extreme enough to dispatch anyone! – which prefigures the final meal.

The man for whom the honor of a philosopher rested upon being a “bad citizen”; for whom being a philosopher meant “teaching materialism!”¹⁴; and for whom materialism was “the antidote to misanthropy” (*Système d’Epicure*, § xxxviii) had a final wish, to be buried on the grounds of the French Embassy in Berlin – seemingly a patriotic gesture, but one document explains that he wanted to be buried at the foot of a particular pear tree in that garden.¹⁵ His

¹¹ *Anti-Sénèque* or *Discours sur le bonheur*, in *Ceuvres philosophiques*, ed. F. Markovits (Paris, 1987), vol. 2, p. 286.

¹² *La Volupté*, in *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹³ “La faculté vengée” (Paris, 1747), p. 170.

¹⁴ both from *Discours préliminaire*, in *Oeuvres*, vol. 1, p. 18.

¹⁵ The latter detail appears in an anonymous, unpublished “Mémoire historique sur la vie de La Mettrie” which was found in a collection of Maupertuis’ papers in the Bernoulli collection, now in the Landesbibliothek Gotha; quoted by Martin Fontius, “Der Tod eines ‘Philosophe’. Unbekannte Nachrufe auf La Mettrie,” *Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie* VI (1967), p. 24.

wish was denied; he rests in the garden of the French Catholic church in Friedrichstadt, which was reduced to near-ruins in World War II. This fate confirms his own suspicion, that “he who chooses man as an object of study must expect to have man as an enemy.”¹⁶

¹⁶ *Discours sur le bonheur*, p. 269.