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Natural Acts Restore Linear Relationships in Pynchon's Mason & Dixon

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

May 2008

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2008

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This paper opens by establish both sides of the Materialist-Immaterialist debate in the eighteenth century. Specifically, it focuses on how Julien Offray La Mettrie (a Materialist) exposed flaws in Nicolas Malebranche and the Church's (Immaterialist) position. This latter position relied on the assumption that the immateriality of man's soul suggested a closeness with other immaterialist entities, such as divinity. If this is true, then as the reasoning goes it is also true that man places himself in a morally superior position over beasts resulting in the establishment of a hierarchical relationship.

Although the reasoning of this hierarchical relationship is called into doubt by La Mettrie Mason & Dixon, by Thomas Pynchon, demonstrates man attempts to reestablish this relationship, his failure to do so, and suggests to the reader that natural, linear relationships persevere. This paper proves this hypothesis by examining the relationships of men in eighteenth century South Africa and North America.

In their colonizing efforts in South Africa at the time the Dutch use a watch with a

second hand and shotguns—both new inventions—in an effort to establish order and reassert a hierarchical relationship over the native Malays, whom the Dutch considered beasts. A natural act, the Transit of Venus (TOV), intervenes reestablishing linear relationships between men in South Africa. It is at this time Dixon using his will, and acting more on passion and emotion—more beastlike—prevents a Dutchman from potentially murdering native Malays.

Not unlike the Dutch enterprise in South Africa a similar pattern can be seen in the European Enlightenment enterprise in North America at the time. Using celestial measuring tools plotting the Western Line was to be one of the great organizing, rational, Enlightenment project in North America. Throughout the project specifically and colonial America at large, celestial measuring tools and shotguns are employed to insinuate order, and, like the Dutch, establish hierarchical relationships. Again, a natural act by Dixon—this time against a slave trader in Baltimore—foils the enterprisers hierarchical relationship to people he thought of as no more than beasts. In both South Africa and North America Dixon's acts are based on emotion and passion, as such they are opposed to the rationality of the Enlightenment enterprise, and the hierarchical relationships that enterprise attempts to establish. This paper argues that it is natural acts that help prove technological inventions flawed in their aim of establishing order and hierarchy, and instead reassert the linear relationships that exist.

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## Natural Acts Restore Linear Relationships in Pynchon's Mason & Dixon

During the latter half of the seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth century there existed the widespread popular belief that human beings were the most intelligent animals on earth. Some thinkers of the time even argued that humans were not animals at all, but rather beings superior to animals. Prior to the eighteenth century man assumed he was superior to other beasts because, as the reasoning went, the immateriality of his soul suggested a closeness with other immaterialist entities, such as divinity. However, a polarizing thinker of the eighteenth century, Julien Offray La Mettrie, exposed flaws in this dominant and popular assumption. A debate ensued over the constitution of the human soul, specifically, whether it is material or immaterial. How this debate was resolved determined how man saw himself in relation to other beasts. A result of the outcome of the Materialist debate of the eighteenth century was a debate focusing on man's alleged superior intelligence over other beasts. The people arguing in favor of man's superiority were not starved for evidence to support their position. The eighteenth century saw an unprecedented burst of new inventions, such as the watch with a second hand, the shotgun, and new celestial measuring instruments. There was a compulsion felt by some at the time to restore man to a position superior to beasts. In Thomas Pynchon's Mason & Dixon man uses the new technologies he has invented to create hierarchical relationships not with other beasts, but with other men. Natural acts, such as the Transit of Venus (TOV) in South Africa and the exertion of Dixon's will in North America, foreclose such relationships and reassert natural linear relationships.

Before examining La Mettrie's Materialist position, it is helpful first to understand the reasoning and logic behind the Immaterialist position, the belief in man's



superior intelligence. Nicolas Malebranche, a seventeenth-century philosopher and occasional dabbler in science, proposed that there is a definite split between the constitution of the soul and the constitution of the body. His position can be seen most clearly in the first of his Dialogues in which Theodore, the protagonist, states Malebranche's beliefs directly: "my soul is not material. . . . It is a substance which thinks and which has no resemblance to the extended substance of which my body is made up" (73). Morris Ginsberg, in his introduction to the Dialogues, underscores this point, noting that Malebranche believes that the "mind can only know ideas, [it] can only know that which is like itself spiritual in character" (39). Malebranche's position is not terribly estranged from that of the Church at the time. Like that dominant institution, he believed in the distinction between the immateriality of the soul and the materiality of the body. Because of Malebranche's prominence and the influence at the time of the Church, this position was accepted by many as self-evident.

Malebranche extended his argument by positing that corporeal entities, or matter, cannot act upon the soul, and the soul cannot act upon corporeal entities. Rather, he believed that "[t]here is no real union between the soul and the body. It is with God alone that we are truly united" (54). The logic follows that if the soul is purely spiritual in nature, then it can only have relations with those things that are equally spiritual in nature, namely God. To grasp this point is to understand the elevated position such thinking gives to man's status in the world. Unlike beasts who, according to Malebranche, were wholly material, man possessed an immaterial nature that allowed him to place himself in an elevated position, much above that of beasts and only slightly

below that of God. Malebranche and the Church created an arbitrary space between man and other beasts.

Throughout the century immediately after his death, Malebranche's thoughts and writings were studied and reacted against by philosophers, particularly La Mettrie. In his most famous piece, Machine Man, La Mettrie establishes a flaw in the logic behind the immateriality of the soul.<sup>i</sup> Short of pledging his allegiance to an Empiricist school of thinking, La Mettrie nearly aligns himself with one by making statements such as: "it is only *a posteriori*, or by trying as it were to disentangle the soul from the body's organs, that we can, not necessarily discover with certainty the true nature of man, but reach the greatest possible degree of probability on the subject" (5, emphasis Thomson). From this, his position seems modest; he claims to know only what he can see and touch, what he can know through his senses. He does not even claim certainty as to his knowledge of the constitution of the soul. In effect, La Mettrie's ideas foreshorten the distance between human beings and other beasts of the earth. While in hindsight La Mettrie's position seems reasonable and perhaps even pragmatic, at the time his views enraged proponents of Malebranche's Immaterialist beliefs. La Mettrie's ideas dislodged man from the vaulted position which Immaterialists, such as Malebranche and the Church assigned it.

Before La Mettrie wrote Machine Man, the consequences of Immaterialism were well understood by most people. In brief, if the soul is immaterial, and if it can only communicate with other immaterial substances, namely God, then it follows that since man's soul is so closely aligned with what is believed to be the most high-minded entity, man then, should act with utmost morality in his relationships with other men. The publication of Machine Man disrupted people's faith and confidence in this Immaterialist

position. The Materialist stance challenged the Immaterialist position by attacking its logic. Since the Materialist's position holds that the material soul's relationship to divinity cannot be determined, it follows then that the logic linking man to God is imperfect. If the link between man and God is flawed, then the position from which man can espouse his own high-mindedness becomes untenable. The absence of this link creates uncertainty as to how human beings are supposed to act. In the absence of God there is no longer a model to follow as to the most moral way to treat others.

The severing of the link between man and God exposed by La Mettrie is exploited in Mason & Dixon by the Learned English Dog (L.E.D.). While singing and dancing at a bar, the L.E.D. professes to be knowledgeable in all things, even things that may or may not exist. One is taken aback by the fact that this dog proposes to have knowledge of all things, while his singing and dancing are seemingly taken for granted! This dog can do it all—perhaps even more than some human beings are able to do! Certainly this flies in the face of the apostles of Malebranche and the Church. Being mindful of La Mettrie's ideas allows one to see the way in which the distance between human beings and beasts, in this case a dog, is foreshortened.

The L.E.D. is strategically placed at the beginning of the novel in order to dissolve, from the start, the stance that human beings are intellectually superior to beasts. The L.E.D. exploits the flaw in Immaterialist logic when he states that all dogs, as best as they are able, purposefully alter their behavior to mime that of their masters, humans. By telling Mason that ““we [dogs] know how to evoke from you, Man, one day at a time, at least enough Mercy for one day more of Life,”” the L.E.D. reveals to Mason his kind's motivation for aping human beings (22). It is important for dogs to mirror human

behavior because their survival depends on it. Yet their survival depends largely on the actions of humans as well. The L.E.D. makes this clear when he tells Mason that his kind “‘nightly [delay] the Blades of our Masters by telling back to them tales of their humanity’” (22). The reasoning behind the L.E.D.’s words suggests that if a dog acts enough like a human he will not be killed. The assumption the L.E.D. makes is that in his daily life man acts humanely, i. e., morally. Malebranche and others of his ilk argue that man’s elevated position is secured because of his innate morality. Since this does not account for the likelihood of inherent or acquired baseness, this is flawed thinking. Seen in light of the L.E.D.’s words, La Mettrie’s point is perhaps more acute than it would seem at first glance. The gap between man and beast may not be much of a gap at all.

Further supporting the importance of the L.E.D.’s ideas is the fact that throughout his work La Mettrie is consistent in his man-beast comparison. For example, regarding the similarity between the two he asks rhetorically, then answers: “What was man before he invented words and learned languages? An animal of a particular species” (13). In his contemporary study, Science and Humanism in the French Enlightenment, Aram Vartanian examines, among other things, the consequences of La Mettrie’s thinking. His explication of La Mettrie’s comparison speaks to what the L.E.D. is getting at: “the kind of knowledge obtainable about [beasts] equates being with doing, and it provides at the same time a basis for comparison, thanks to the same equation between them and us” (63). Vartanian, commenting upon how man’s actions define his nature, notes that “[t]he human animal, like the nonhuman one, is what it can do; its activity is its essence; its abilities defines its ‘nature’” (64). One can see why the issue of the nature of the human soul was debated at the time with such force. If man is endowed with a soul, one that he

presumably believes will exit the body once that shell expires, then one has an impetus to act morally. Thus, how one acts defines the type of person he is and the type of soul he has. Conversely, if a person does not have a soul or one that is made of matter that does not pass on, and if there is no Judgement Day, no Maker to meet, then there is no motivation for a person to act high-mindedly. How one acts matters. As Mason tells Dixon, ““Acts have consequences . . . they must”” (346). Vartanian calls attention to the consequences of Materialist thinking when he notes that “[t]he attempt to understand [humans] by the same means used to understand [beasts] has the collateral effect of dissolving the established social and moral values that stratify humanity” (64). Since human actions in Mason & Dixon take place within the context of the Materialist debate, how human beings act toward one another is loaded with significance.

Undermining the popular certainty of the time regarding the superior position of man over beasts in matters of morality causes disorienting and destabilizing effects for characters in Mason & Dixon. For if a beast, specifically a dog in this case, is granted to have a soul equal to that of man, then it is difficult to posit with any certainty which of the two is the morally superior creature. It is to establish these uncertainties that the L.E.D. appears so early in the novel. Much like the way in which La Mettrie’s book disrupted the assumptions of the popular beliefs during the eighteenth century, the appearance of the L.E.D. serves to disrupt assumptions the reader may have regarding the seemingly innate morality of man. A doubt permeating the Enlightenment Age is that if man does not possess an immaterial soul which elevates him above beasts, then it cannot be posited with certainty that man is superior to beasts. It is clear that the L.E.D. (with the help of La Mettrie) has shortened the distance between the two.

If man is not morally superior even to beasts like dogs, then the motivation for inventing new technologies has its provenance in man's attempt to reassert himself into the formerly foreclosed morally and intellectually superior position. Man will use new technologies, such as the watch with a second hand, the shotgun, and celestial measuring instruments, to order the world in which he lives. By undertaking these actions he believes he will gain knowledge that other beasts are unable to acquire. Man's hope is that this new knowledge will restore his superior position by recreating the distance lost when La Mettrie proved flawed the idea of the immateriality of the soul. In short, man seeks to flex his intellectual muscles. Two examples from Mason & Dixon in which man flexes these muscles occur when Mason and Dixon plot the Transit of Venus (TOV) in South Africa and when they chart the Western Line in North America. If man is able to invent tools that will help him understand the world around him, then presumably he will know how to act with superior morality in this ostensibly better understood world.

For man to see himself in a superior position he must gain knowledge that other beasts do not have—Mason and Dixon's use of new technologies to plot the stars is one example of this. For Dixon in particular, the work of surveying the stars and plotting lines is reassuring because of the certainty it provides: “one of the few good things stargazing's good for, is finding out where you are exactly, upon the surface of the Earth;” in other words, it has a stabilizing effect on him (666). One way to characterize a surveyor's job is to say that he reveals what appears to be actually true. He calculates and measures the location of stars at different times so that he can locate his position on earth as precisely as possible. Revealing knowledge and eliminating uncertainty is constituent of this enterprise. Essentially, the sphere of the unknown is infringed upon by

the ever increasing sphere of the known. When this occurs, man's relation to both changes. Justin Scott Coe suggests the changes to the aspects of knowledge implicated in such actions when he notes that "[t]he calculations made by the astronomers . . . are to transform, both scientifically and religiously, with the help of the stars, the nature of earth knowledge" (par. 18). The surveyors' measuring of the stars represents a grab by science—in this case men of Science and Reason—of knowledge that was once thought to be religious. Their actions and words portend future intrusions as well. When speaking to the Vroom daughters at the observatory in the mountains of South Africa, Mason, revealing the scope of this enterprise, states that "[o]ne day, someone sitting in a room will succeed in reducing all the Observations, from all 'round the World,""—including, presumably, Mason and Dixon's—"to a simple number of Seconds, of Arc—and that will be the Parallax" (93). This is reduction to the infinitesimal, and it was a common practice during the Age of Enlightenment. Mason and Dixon are merely part of a global practice. Through inventions and technological advancements human beings were increasing their intelligence by making the unknown known and at the same time reducing the number of things requiring faith, reducing the amount of faith a person needed in general.

This tracking from faith-based knowledge to empirical-based knowledge is a move away from the Age of Miracles (as Pynchon fashions the age preceding the Enlightenment). In his article for The New York Times, "Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?," Pynchon characterizes this earlier age as one filled with "deep and religious yearnings for . . . mythical time" (par. 15). Coincidentally, the Age of Miracles is the time in which Malebranche wrote. Contrasting this Age of Miracles, Pynchon characterizes the Age of

Enlightenment as one in which “[i]n ways more or less literal, folks in the 18<sup>th</sup> century believed that once upon a time all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so. Giants, dragons, spells.”—here he is referring to the Age of Miracles—“The laws of nature had not been so strictly formulated back then. What had once been true working magic had, by the Age of Reason, degenerated into mere machinery” (par. 16). At the time people’s faith in the unknown, such as God and religion, began to wane. The surveyors’ work is indicative of this trend.

In plotting the Parallax, Mason and Dixon establish the foundation for complete revelation of, essentially, all things celestial. At the time this can be thought to be a direct reproof of religion. A popularly held belief of the time was that the heavens (where God resides) were above man, up past the stars. And it follows that the more mankind intrude into the realm of the unknown the less room religion has to inhabit. The Reverend Cherrycoke speaking to the LeSpark family in Philadelphia notes this trend when he says that “[t]he New Religion had crested better than twenty years before . . . — by the [seventeen] ’sixties we were all well into a Descent, that grew more vertiginous with the days, ever toward some great trough whose terrible depth no one knew” (261). Not only are Mason and Dixon implicitly indicted by the Rev<sup>d</sup>, but Maskelyne, Le Marie, Emerson, and the whole Royal Society are culpable in this usurpation as well.

In point of fact, Mason and Dixon themselves are conflicted as to whether they are Men of Science or Men of Religion. Determining which of the two they are carries with it consequences as to the morality of their actions and, more generally, the actions of society. In Mason & Dixon the ideas of Science and Reason are so closely intertwined that each loses what might make it distinct from the other. This can be seen in the



language Maskelyne uses when speaking of their work to Mason: “Reason, or any Vocation to it,— the Pursuit of the Sciences” (135). Similarly, Dixon energetically embraces his work, but it is not altogether divorced from his interest in religion. In fact, he seems to confound the two when, in a bar on St. Helena, he proclaims to Mason and Maskelyne that “Newton is my Deity” (116). Mason likewise characterizes his epoch as an age “with its Faith in Mechanical Ingenuity” (449). Mason is referring here to the reaction of the surveying crew to Vaucanson’s mechanical duck. Nonetheless, Mason and Dixon themselves are not immune from transposing their faith from religion to science. Whereas before people had faith in religion which they saw as providing certain truths, now they begin to place their faith in technologies they see as providing other certain truths. Since La Mettrie proved faith in religion to be untenable, man’s faith now gravitates towards the seeming stability of technology.

The crux of the problem is that man can no longer count on religion as providing a moral model on which to base his actions; therefore, in an effort to have such a model of human behavior, man shifts his faith to new technologies. Specifically, in Mason & Dixon people put their faith in such technologies as, the watch with a second hand, the shotgun, and new celestial measuring instruments. The idea is that these technologies will increase man’s intelligence and morality which will allow man to think of himself as a superior being; therefore, as the reasoning stands, man will serve as his own model of moral behavior. Unlike religion, these new technologies, since they play a conspicuously prominent role pushing culture toward commerce and industry, are not necessarily benign. “[F]or Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable,” and slavery in South Africa and North America in Mason & Dixon is impossible without technology (108). Yet, the

reliance on rationality and reason—Mason and Dixon plotting the Transit of Venus in South Africa and their plotting of the Western Line from Philadelphia are examples of this—is itself an unnatural act. Rationalism is an unnatural act because it is using technology (something not naturally found in nature and hence unnatural) to perpetuate further unnatural acts. However, these unnatural acts, and others like them, are done so that man can regain some certainty that was lost when the linear line from God to man was disrupted by La Mettrie, and to use the certainty technology seems to promise as a basis for moral behavior. Yet, technology cannot be relied upon with absolute certainty, and Emerson's perpetual motion watch stands as evidence of this uncertainty.

By and large the implications intimated by the failure of Emerson's watch are given little heed. Because it goes against the Law of the Conservation of Energy, the watch initially represents an affront by technology against nature. By never having to be wound, the watch is able to keep accurate time at sea, something thought impossible at the time. All appearances suggest that the watch is a piece of technology that will provide order where before there was none. Yet, eventually it becomes unwieldy, first morphing into a vegetable-like object, then seemingly growing a mouth and biting R. C. (a land-surveyor) after he swallows it and then tries to retrieve it (321-25). After a letter to Emerson relaying the news, neither Dixon, Mason, nor any member of the surveying crew privy to the episode speak of the watch again. This is one instance where technology fails—although the watch still ticks, one is unable to read the time on the watch—and it stands as representative of the flaw of uncertainty inherent in technology of the time.<sup>ii</sup> Essentially, it creates disorder because it will not allow itself to be

controlled by man. If the watch fails, then other technologies may be flawed as well.

Yet, in Mason & Dixon, shortcomings of this kind are ignored altogether.

Proponents of new technological advances espouse their usefulness for the fact that they order specific aspects of human life in particular and the world in general. It is these functions of technology that are said to provide a basis for proper moral behavior. Technologies, such as the watch with a second hand and the shotgun, provide order in a seemingly disordered world. Order creates stability which is something religion formerly provided. So if new technologies benefit mankind by establishing order out of disorder, then allegedly man is justified in using these new technologies for his own benefit.

While the use of technology to achieve order does not, in and of itself, create oppressive environments that debase human relationships, the possibility of this happening exists. It is here that the enterprise of using technology to recreate the distance between man and beasts has its flaw.

In Mason & Dixon the Dutch colonizers in South Africa—the Company is their sanctioned organizing force—believe they can use technology, such as watches with second hands and shotguns, to create order, thus making known their corner (South Africa) of the unknown continent (Africa). True to form, Police Office Bonk, working for the Company, wastes no time making known an unknown element, which in this case is Mason, who upon his arrival is immediately “enter’d in the Records as a Person of Interest . . . in the Castle of the Compagnie” (59). At first glance, this act of recording a person in a records book might not seem terribly technological. Although the instruments—pen and paper—by which this is done are not new inventions, how they are employed, namely, as part of an absolute accounting of unknown elements for ordering

purposes, is in fact a more recent technique. This exchange between Bonk and the surveyor is emblematic of the Company's goal to impose absolute order in South Africa, or, in Bonk's words, "'our Hope is for no disruptions of any kind'" (59). Speaking for the Company, Bonk here lays plain the Company's goals in accumulating information. The appearance of possessing knowledge allows the Company to see itself in a superior position not only to other beasts, but, more critically, to other human beings as well. Man's, in this case the Company's, superiority to other beasts is, for all intents and purposes, taken for granted. The exception to this would be a situation in which the Company sees other human beings, such as slaves, as beasts unto themselves.

By shifting his object of comparison from animals to humans, the scale on which man's superiority can be judged is implicitly and irrevocably altered. In the past, man's attempts to posit himself as morally and intellectually superior to other beasts carried with them the implied dismissal of beasts as subjugated to man. Man never looked to beasts, such as dogs, as guides for moral behavior, but only toward God for this model. The L.E.D., by telling Mason that he and others of his ilk look toward man as a model of humility, even going so far as to refer to their owners as Masters, tacitly implies their subjugated position. The L.E.D.'s reasoning suggests a hierarchical relationship. The distance La Mettrie foreshortened was hierarchical, not linear, although one could argue that by foreshortening the former he implicated the latter. In the case of the Company in South Africa, man seeks to apply that hierarchical gauge of measurement (perspective, really) to linear relationships. No longer is man satisfied with the goal of using technology to establish his superiority over other beasts, now man aims to use technology to establish distance between himself and his fellow man.

One way the Company tries to impose this shift of perspective is by using a recently minted technology, a watch with a second hand, during its investigations of subjects.<sup>iii</sup> It employs the watch in an effort to eliminate ““disruptions,”” calling to mind Bonk’s word to Mason (59). In his book, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Michel Foucault notes the role investigations serve when he states that “[t]he investigation was the sovereign power arrogating to itself the right to establish the truth by a number of regulated techniques” (225). At the time of the Dutch colonization of South Africa, there were few instruments more accurate and reliable for accomplishing these aims than a watch with a second hand. By using this piece of technology every question, answer, and action of the investigation, by all appearances, could be recorded. As Pynchon writes:

During an interrogation, someone will wish to note the precise time that each question is ask’d, or action taken, by a clock with two hands,— not because anyone will ever review it,— perhaps to intimidate the subject with the most advanc’d mechanical Devise of its time, certainly because Minute-Scal’d Accuracy is possible by now, and there is room for Minutes to be enter’d in the Records. (Mason & Dixon 156)

The use of the watch to keep precise records is twice removed from the Company’s ultimate goal of eliminating disruptions. Initially, the Company hopes the watch will serve the purpose of dazzling the subject. Essentially, this means that the subject most likely has never before seen such a sophisticated piece of machinery, and therefore he is rendered awestruck at the sight of it. The Company uses the watch to create a distance, but it employs this technology in a peculiar way to achieve this goal. Instead of, as one

might presume, using the technology for the purposes of its invention, the Company, instead, uses the technology in a way that merely shows off its technological sophistication. The use of technology in this way is ostentatious and subtly menacing for the off-handed way in which the Company treats such supposedly significant technology. It gains a seeming advantage by employing technology not for its purposes, but merely as a display of ostensible intellectual superiority. A second use of this new technology is to create the conditions that make it possible to record data on a minute scale of measurement that has heretofore never been seen. The watch creates order by marking the precise time of each action. The Company recognizes the dual nature of the watch to create information, while at the same time denying the subject access to that same information. It serves the purpose of increasing the intelligence of those who possess the watch, in this instance the Company. For the Company's purposes, the watch creates distance merely by standing for the appearance of such desired distance.

By using a watch to record large amounts of information which will be used by one person to gain an advantage over another, technology creates the appearance of superiority. The Company believes, and it hopes its subjects believe, that it is in a superior position. Yet the twist here is that this position of superiority is empty; the Company never uses the information, so therefore it does not gain any actual superiority over its subjects. The superiority, the distance created by this "information," is merely a sleight of hand. The Company's actions here cause a subtle shift in how information and knowledge are used. Actions, such as the Company's in this case, are what Foucault has in mind when he characterizes police "supervision [as] that [which] seeks ideally to reach the most elementary particle" (214). The watch with a second hand creates the

opportunity for the Company to gather information that goes unused. Essentially, the Company has been creating order, or at least its appearance. Similarly, the shotgun, if not directly enabling the bearer to collect information and thus elevate his own position, at the very least gives the appearance that in the face of powerlessness such an augmentation of power is possible.

Yet the Company's goal of obtaining information through ordering goes beyond the interrogation room and radiates outward throughout South Africa—a pursuit in which the Dutch colonizing citizens take part. It is the recent invention of the shotgun which makes such a vast attempt at ordering possible. Prior to “Trekking” into the north country, Bonk intimates the scope of the Dutch colonizing enterprise when he tells the surveyors that the Company “‘desire[s] total Control, over ev'ry moment of ev'ry Life here” (154). While the watch is an effective information gathering tool within the space of the interrogation room, the shotgun facilitates information gathering beyond that space. In effect, it can be thought of as a controlling, i. e., ordering device, and it is used as such by the Dutch colonizers who can be seen “[r]iding in and out of Town . . . carrying long Rifles styl'd ‘Sterloops,’ each with an inverted Silver Star upon the Cheek-Piece” (101). This is ordering via conspicuous intimidation. The point here is that the Dutch believe they can utilize technology, in this case a shotgun, to decrease disruptions to improve their own lives. While they may employ shotguns to improve their lives in a material way (i. e., they believe their lives will have fewer disruptions), the technology has the malignant effect of harming relationships among human beings in South Africa.

The expansion of agency that incorporates not only the Company but the Dutch citizenry as well derives from the disingenuous ideal of civilizing natives. The unspoken

requirement of such an enterprise is that the colonizing party claims that it must have as much knowledge of the people it is colonizing as possible so that it can successfully, in its mind at least, satisfy its objectives. Before the enterprise is undertaken there is an inherent distancing already present. And, in fact, this already present superior attitude of the colonizer is a prerequisite that allows the enterprise to be undertaken at all. For the colonizer, knowledge provides a seeming appearance of power. To gain this knowledge the colonizing party must be keenly, almost suspiciously, attuned to gathering any and all information, and the Dutch employ the shotgun for this purpose. Yet, in the case of the Dutch in South Africa the technology corrupts its bearer.

The incident of Cornelius Vroom using a shotgun to shoot up a market indiscriminately in the Cape of Good Hope is emblematic of technology's adulteration of human relationships. A shotgun in the hands of Cornelius gives him such an overabundant sense of superiority that he becomes a threat to his fellow man and must be restrained. Cornelius, staggering in the streets of the Cape of Good Hope, perhaps blind, first uses his shotgun to blow away part of a roof, sending tiles scattering into the street; then with his second shot he obliterates a watermelon, nearly missing a grocer; finally, while he is aiming for a third shot at some as-yet-to-be-determined target, Dixon separates him from his gun (147-48). When Dixon finally releases Cornelius from the shotgun, the Dutchman's reaction—"No! I am *supposed* to do this!"—reveals that something outside of Cornelius motivates his agency (148, emphasis Pynchon). The Dutch fancy themselves as superior to the native Malays, but Cornelius's incident proves that distance to be a mirage of the technology. In his response to Dixon—"This is not about Honor, it is about Blood!"—the proximity of Cornelius's state of mind is close to



that of a native Malay's (148). Dixon admits as much when he assuages Cornelius: "were you a Malay Lad I shouldn't be that surprised . . . ?" (148) The interrogative tone of Dixon's statement is more for himself (and perhaps the reader). Purposefully, Dixon speaks with uncertainty because he does not believe what he is saying. But, for the sake for calming the Dutchman, Dixon cleverly makes the type of statement that appears reassuring to Cornelius. It is reassuring because it serves to reinforce the, albeit ill-fated, perception Cornelius holds of his superior position relative to the Malays. Rather than creating order, as the Dutch and particularly Cornelius had hoped, the technology disturbs the bearer's relationship with other humans.

One way to understand the Company's actions is to imagine Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, except with agency. Simply put, the apparatus of the Dutch colonizing machine personifies Bentham's Panopticon. Speaking in more general terms, Foucault describes the scope of such an apparatus when he says that "it is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with" (213). The comparison between Bentham's solid building and the more fluid version in South Africa is not anachronistic, for at the time of the Dutch occupation, Bentham was in England drafting such plans for his building. Both aim for the appearance of an ever-watchful presence. Although after the fact both have come to be thought of negatively, while they were in their inchoate stages they were thought to be beneficial. In a near echoing of Bentham's actual Panopticon, the more fluid—and, admittedly, metaphorical—one in South Africa seeks constant and continual observation. In both instances the subject "is the object of information" (Foucault 200). The shotgun establishes for its bearer putative

permanent surveillance over his subjects. This power situation corrupts the relationships between the Dutch and Malays. The shotgun in South Africa has the same negative effects as the Panopticon, and for the same reason: both become symbols of technology that divide, rather than unite, human beings.

Dixon reveals the shortcomings of the Company's efforts at a totalizing account when he tells Mason that "there do remain, beyond the Reach of the V.O.C., routes of Escape, pockets of Safety,— Markets that never answer to the Company, gatherings that remain forever unknown" (69). No one can say how the enclaves survive; however, their existence represents the failure of the Company's enterprise. The Company's shortcomings are known even by those under its employ, people such as Police Officer Bonk. In a revelatory moment he tells Dixon that he is moving with his family to the north, "[p]erhaps over the Mountains. Out of the Reach of the Company . . . I could not for them longer work" (154). Bonk's diction is curious because he switches the indirect object for the direct object; in other words, the indirect object is taken for the direct object. The effect of this shift of stress is that Bonk is not quitting work so much as he is quitting the Company. Perhaps Bonk is moving because he recognizes the failure of such a totalizing project. Yet not only does he see its failure, he foresees its failure ever to accomplish its goals.

Bonk is part of a trend, the pattern of which he discloses to Dixon: "do you know, a curious thing happen'd. The more the Company exerted itself,— Searches in the middle of the Night, property impounded,— the more Farmers up-country felt press'd to move North, away from the Castle'" (154). So it is that Bonk who at first rigidly personified the tenets of the Company, now utterly forsakes it for a life outside of

technology and control. Clearly, Bonk does not now see himself as part of the Company, as being in a superior position to the Malay natives. Rather than distancing himself, he moves towards closeness with them. This migration is a reproof not of the technology in and of itself, but rather the rationality inherent in the use of such technology.

Since the acts that the Dutch and the surveyors undertake are calculated, rational acts, they are unnatural. The actions of the Dutch are attempts to establish man as unequal with himself—the Dutch do not see themselves as equal to the Malays. This is unnatural because, on the contrary, man is equal to himself, and attempts to establish otherwise—especially those that are calculated, rational, and premeditated—are unnatural acts. Acts of nature, natural acts, prove the Dutch enterprise to be flawed.

While the Dutch stubbornly act in unnatural ways, in spite of the successful efforts of the Malays and others who avoid being listed in the Company's records book, the natural act of the Transit of Venus (TOV) arrests (albeit temporarily) their enterprise. Although Mason and Dixon measure the celestial event, it is the event itself, and not the act of measuring it, that causes the rupture in the Dutch enterprise. The effect of nature via the TOV has a charmed effect on the people of South Africa: "Astronomers and Hosts walk about for Days in deep stupor" (99). It is telling that this act of nature only seems to have this effect over the people—the Dutch—most distantly estranged from nature. In both a tactile and sensory way nature seems to have an enervating effect on them. After the Transit they do not seem to hold as unflinchingly to the distancing they have heretofore sought to establish. Conversely, the TOV seems to have an empowering effect on those in South Africa most intimate with nature—the Malays. After the Transit they "grow more visible and distinct, their Voices stronger, and their Musick more pervasive"

(99). One can think of this as an act of nature amplifying those people most closely akin to it. Said differently, the Transit is an act of nature that in its radiation disturbs the esteemed position to which man holds technology. The impact of the TOV on the Dutch can be seen when Dixon tells Mason that this act represents a “turning of [the] Soul . . . Few, if any, beatings” (100). Mason’s reply is that “[t]he Dutch are afraid . . . unto Death” (100). This turn is a turn of the Dutch soul toward the Malayan soul. By closing this distance the act of nature seems to suggest that the distance and superiority that man so doggedly strives for is illusory. The superior position is a construct of man, it is not a naturally occurring condition in nature; instead, the condition of nature is that of linear relations among human beings. The natural act of the Transit reestablishes this linearity, and for a short while the Dutch recognize and speak to the Malays as if they recognized them as equals.

The Transit has a curious effect on Dixon as well. Dixon’s act of seizing Cornelius, because it occurs after and not before the Transit, testifies to the force of the natural act. Dixon does perform a brave and humane act by arresting a delirious and perhaps insane Cornelius from shooting up the market any more than he already has; however prior to this, Dixon has missed opportunities to prevent Dutch violence. The only difference from before until now is the TOV takes place—one natural act perpetuates a second natural act. While arresting Cornelius, Dixon takes on a demeanor and attitude that is animal-like. Dixon’s lack of rationality and reasoning contribute to this change; he “turns and makes a run at [Cornelius] . . . the Dutchman has never faced a charging animal in his life”—the natural act intervenes (148). It is not a coincidence that Dixon acts more naturally, more like the natural animal he actually is after the Transit. In

Dixon's case the natural act of the Transit has made him act in a more natural way that heretofore has not been seen in him or Mason.

By refusing to be repressed and ignored, nature not only makes its presence known, but also erases the distance which man created for himself. If it is between a hierarchical relationship created by using technology to establish a superior-inferior dichotomy or a linear relationship in which those binaries do not exist, then by making itself known, the natural event turns man's attention to the latter of these relationships. The situation changes in that the Dutch find natural relationships with the Malays to be nettling since now secrets are revealed. At the church services one notices that there is "full knowledge that ev'ryone knows ev'ryone else's secrets" (147).

Besides imbuing the people of South Africa with calculation and rationalism, the Enlightenment enterprise viewed North America—because of its alleged purity—as providing a better opportunity for its tenets to flourish. Being as unadulterated as it was at the time, North America was seen as a ripe target to be imbued with reason. The ethos of this ideology is captured by Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke:

I was back in America once more, finding, despite all, that I could not stay away from it, this object of hope that Miracles might yet occur, that God might yet return to Human affairs, that all the wistful fictions necessary to the childhood of a species might yet come true. (353)

Granted there were also people inhabiting North America before Europeans arrived. The natural way in which the native Indians lived provided what the Europeans considered to be a prerequisite for the undertaking of their Enlightenment project. Commenting on the Enlightenment enterprise in North America as seen in Mason & Dixon, David Cowart

notes that it “justifie[d] itself as a bringing of light to the benighted,” (346). The native Indians lived naturally, and it was Europeans who pejoratively characterized their way of living as primitive or immoral. As colonizing Europeans saw it, the Enlightenment enterprise required subjects in need of order; they viewed the native Indians and the wilderness of North America as necessary for their enterprise. In concert with these ideas Mason and Dixon, again working for the Royal Society, use the technology of celestial measuring instruments to engage in a consistent pattern of rational acts in North America.

Because the technology they use is flawed, Mason and Dixon fail to accomplish their goal of achieving precise measurements. Their measurements of the North-East corner of the Delaware peninsula produce lines that are nothing short of jumbled, for “[t]he Surveyors soon discover, that the Meridian drawn north from the Tangent Point, will run slightly *inside* the Twelve-Mile Arc, crossing it twice at points about a mile and a half apart” (468, emphasis Pynchon). This error produces “the notorious Wedge” which stands as geometrical evidence of the failure of the tools to measure precisely. Technically speaking, the failure “result[s] from the failure of the Tangent Point to be exactly at this corner of Maryland, but rather some five miles south” (469). The product of this failed measuring is an anomaly, a piece of land of “doubtful ownership” (469).

This error in measurement should not be taken as an aberration so much as part and parcel of the surveyors’ business of measuring. The problem of imprecise measuring is not absent in South Africa either. There, the times Dixon records for the TOV “are two to four seconds ahead of Mason’s” (98). Mason’s sly reply to Dixon—“[w]ith all the other Corrections to make, now we must also introduce another, for observational impatience”—implies this is another error that must be accounted for (98). Thus, this is

another instance in which Enlightenment technology, whose purpose is to create order, actually creates its opposite. Although the errors are noted, they are paid no more heed than that. It is as if the tools, or those using the tools, cannot be culpable of the inaccuracies. Yet it is exactly these technologies and the men using them that serve as the basis for the enterprise in North America. Seemingly undeterred by the inauspicious beginnings of their surveying, Mason and Dixon use the same technology to measure the Western Line.

The surveying crew that measures the Western Line becomes a machine, essentially technology incarnate, but it too stands as a representation of failed technology. Each worker has his own task, yet this machine measures imprecisely. For example, two Chainmen (former surveyors), Darby and Cope, allow light-hearted fun—namely the imitation of Mason and Dixon—to supersede their precise task of measuring the links of chain. In “their Practice of exchanging ten small wood stakes, to keep the Chain count accurate,” Darby and Cope, for different reasons, lose the precision of their “old ten-Chain Method” (473). Dixon underscores the severity of the problem when he exclaims: “[w]e may be miles off by now” (473). This is emblematic of the failure of the European enterprise to bring enlightenment to North America. The failure of the technologies of the enterprise precipitates the ideological failure of the enterprise as well.

Yet the rational acts in North America are different from the rational acts in South Africa because of their territorial consequences: the surveying of the Western Line is a “winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World” (345). In this sense, the “Sacred” is equated with the lands of North America that are unknown to the Europeans. The Indians see the land as

sacred, mysterious, and unknown, while the Europeans see the land as something that can be acquired through technology. As Thomas H. Schaub notes, “the act of surveying the Line is seen to participate in the Enlightenment project of bringing mystery into light, and magic under the reign of reason” (Horvath and Malin 197). The sense of mystery and magic which the Indians hold for the land is understood when Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke notes that

[T]he Warrior-Paths must be deem'd holy, and transgression of them serious, to a degree difficult to imagine in the common British Foot-path dispute. We must either change our notions of the Sacred, or come to terms with these Nations,— and sooner rather than later (386).

It seems no Europeans, save Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke, understand the sanctity the Indians attribute to the land. Implicit in the Rev<sup>d</sup>'s words is the realization of consequences for actions taken. These are not only short term consequences, but long term ones as well.

The Europeans do not seem to recognize the consequences of their actions. Commenting to Dixon on the massacre at Lancaster, Mason notes that “[t]hese Louts believe all's right now,— that they are free to get on with [their] Lives . . . with no Glimmer at all of the Debt they have taken on” (346). Here, Mason seems to share the Rev<sup>d</sup>'s recognition of the consequences of one's actions, while, on the other hand, the Lancasterian “Louts” seem to be careless of the scope of their actions. While Lancasterians and Indians do not necessarily get into a dispute over the Warrior-Path, their dispute is territorial, namely southeastern Pennsylvania. Prior to Mason and Dixon's arrival in Pennsylvania, the Lancasterians try to impose order on a group of twenty-six Indians. They meet resistance, and they resort to technology, namely a shotgun, to restore order. Ultimately though, the shotgun fails in its aim to restore order,



for an Indian scalps the head of the man whose shotgun is used in the massacre. The retribution is ironic in that a more primitive weapon, an ax, seems to produce at least as much order as a shotgun. The surveyors see evidence of this when, on their way back east, they are surprised by a party of Indians, one of whom is carrying the scalp of a Lancasterian. Catfish, an Indian, is “packing a Lancaster Rifle, slung in a Scabbard upon his Saddle, with an inverted Pentacle upon the Stock,” which he has taken from Jabez Disingenuous, a Lancasterian, essentially appropriating European technology (680). Simply put, Catfish uses his ax to scalp Jabez. Earlier, while the surveyors are in Lancaster, and before Jabez became separated from his scalp, he tells the surveyors his plan for order: ““Kill you one Delaware””—Catfish is a Delaware—““you affront the Family at large. Out here, if it’s Blood of mine, of course I must go out and seek redress’” (343). Ironically enough, Catfish, besides appropriating Jabez’s shotgun, seems to have appropriated Jabez’s logic of ordering, in this case righting a wrong with a wrong.

Catfish’s action demonstrates the infection of native Indians by European Enlightenment ideas. Speaking broadly about Europeans who came to North America, Immanuel Ice, an Indian, intimates a possible consequence of the Enlightenment enterprise when he tells the surveyors that ““you sold us your Powers,— your Rifles,— as if encouraging us to shoot at you’” (663). Here Ice shrewdly implicates both Mason and Dixon as representative of the Enlightenment enterprise. Left unsaid in the novel, yet nevertheless a consequence of this transfer of technology, is that Indians eventually turn these shotguns upon other Indians.

Yet the consequences of European uses of technology in North America during the eighteenth century is not limited to native Indians; instead, the work of Mason, Dixon, and their surveying crew incorporates technologies that corrupt human relationships in the years after their deaths. Although the initial purpose of Mason and Dixon's commission has been to settle a land dispute between Maryland and Pennsylvania, the actions of charting the Line will prove to have fateful consequences years later. Captain Zhang, a member of the surveying crew for a short while, hints at such consequences when he warns both surveyors that their project is creating bad history in the future. "Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,— to create thus a Distinction betwixt 'em," a veiled reference to the American Civil War, and the surveyors' role in delineating its primary battlefront (615). With Ice's and Zhang's ideas in mind, Mason and Dixon can be understood as being, at least in part, culpable for facilitating the American Civil War. If the Enlightenment enterprise, a project of rationality and reason, portends such terrible consequences, then the opposite, namely irrationalism and naturalism, must produce benevolent or harmless consequences.

It is the natural act—a product of irrationalism—that is offered as the way to break from the European Enlightenment enterprise and restore morality as a gauge for human relationships. The natural act is characterized as irrational when set in contrast to unnatural and supposedly rational acts, such as plotting the Western Line and slavery. It is irrational because it is an unpremeditated, instinctual act—one done without the intention of ordering or creating distance between man and beast, or man and other men.

For example, Dixon's action in Baltimore in which he stops a slave trader and frees slaves is a natural act unique in Mason & Dixon for its irrationality.

Dixon's action serves as a rebuke to the relationship of hierarchical distance the slave trader seeks to establish between the slaves and himself. Simply put, the slave trader, not unlike the Dutch in South Africa, attempts to establish a hierarchical superior-inferior distance between himself and the slaves, while through his irrational act Dixon forecloses this distance, and at the same time imposes a linear relationship between himself and the slaves. The rational European "Enterpriser"—the slave trader in this case—seems to always have futurity in mind, and because of this he seeks to create a distance between himself and the humans he sees as his subjects—the slaves (697). In other words, the slave trader feels that as a product of Enlightenment heritage he can see a future use for the slaves he peddles. What is prevalent throughout the Enlightenment period and on display in Mason & Dixon is that the European enterpriser never acts with the immediate moment in mind and nothing else. This is true in South Africa as well as North America. The rational acts of Cornelius Vroom, the Company, Mason, Dixon, and the Lancasterians are undertaken with the purpose of creating superiority for themselves. Inherent in this mentality is the distancing such thinking requires. Rare, if ever, is the time when Mason or Dixon is motivated by the immediate present to act. Their estrangement from their own agency contributes to their complicity in perpetuating a trend of creating hierarchical distance between oneself and another. Dixon's act of stopping the slave trader is significant because it breaks from expected Enlightenment thinking. At this point Dixon has become quite agitated, and in his disturbed state does not possess the foresight to imagine acts beyond the immediate present. Essentially,

Dixon acts against the Enlightenment enterprise, but he does so by acting in a natural way.

The act calls attention to itself because of the relationship reversal Dixon's rebuke bluntly suggests. Whereas before the slave trader forces a hierarchical relationship upon the slaves, when Dixon threatens rather than asks the trader, "'must I rather work upon *you* from the Back, like a Beast,'" he reverses the slave trader's role in this relationship (699, emphasis Pynchon). Upon realizing the position in which he finds himself, the slave trader almost immediately pleads for mercy. Dixon sets him free, but keeps the whip, or in his words, the "'Instrument of Shame'" (699). In setting the trader free, Dixon essentially treats him as the trader does the slaves—he maintains a linear rather than a hierarchical relationship with both. He treats the trader like a beast—albeit very briefly—to force the trader to see the hierarchical relationship from the subjugated position. In granting the trader freedom Dixon, although he may loath the man, perpetuates a natural, linear relationship. In a very direct way Dixon is acting out La Mettrie's idea of the law of nature, which he proposed "is a feeling which teaches us what we should not do, by what we would not like to be done to us" (22). Like La Mettrie, Dixon seeks that which brings man closer to nature, i. e., the linear relationship. The relationship reversal is made possible because Dixon takes control of his own agency.

Prior to this act, Dixon's—and Mason's for that matter—control over his own agency has been in doubt. Oftentimes, neither man seems to know where his agency lies. This is a product of the enterprise in which both are complicit; in other words, they are serving the will of others. Dixon crystallizes their estrangement from agency when he

tells Mason that ““Men of Science””—a moniker both men have accepted—““may be but the simple Tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a Hammer knows of a House”” (669). But in Baltimore things are different. There, as the Rev<sup>d</sup> narrates, the surveyors “had a choice at last [to act], and Dixon chose to act”—he takes control of his agency (698). When Dixon stops the slave trader, he is not performing the job he has been contracted to do. The act calls attention to itself not because it is performed in public—this is mere happenstance—but rather, the act is important because it represents Dixon’s embodiment of his own agency. In this instance he is emblematic of naturalism because he is not using any tools outside of his own agency; he is acting with “unthinking Grace;” and he is acting without a purpose in mind other than to stop the rational act in front of him (Mason & Dixon 698). When Dixon acts to stop the slave trader, he shatters the distancing effect the slave trader has created and is imposing. The immediacy of the act makes the act natural and, by Enlightenment standards, irrational. It is an act of Dixon’s will.

While admittedly the act of Dixon’s will is a natural act, it is a necessary act as well. In an environment in which acts of reason produce slavery among other things, the act of the will is the necessary way one can act in such environments. In his article, “Pynchon’s Age of Reason: *Mason & Dixon* and America’s Rise of Rational Discourse,” Jason T. McEntee intimates the significance of Dixon’s natural act when he notes that “Pynchon suggests, passion and emotion guide us as much as (or perhaps more than) reason” (199). Although passion and emotion may not be absolute guides, nevertheless they are means by which one can act to stop allegedly rational acts.

Although the Enlightenment Age bursts with new technologies—watches with second hands, shotguns, and celestial measuring devices—it is an untechnological thing—the human will—that precipitates the most profound and consequential act in Mason & Dixon. Throughout the course of Mason and Dixon’s travels, the human will is spoken about so little as not to exist. It is as if in the Enlightenment Age the human will is something that has been forgotten altogether. However, it does exist, and it does make its presence known. Yet does Dixon’s act, the force of his will, have any bearing on contemporary on the contemporary situation?

Because of the contemporary references Pynchon includes in Mason & Dixon—a Rabbi greets Dixon with the Star Trek hand salute (“the Fingers spread two and two, and the Thumb held away from them likewise”), and the slave trader cries out for his twentieth-century-named children, Tiffany and Jason, to name only two allusions—characters’ actions comment on contemporary times (485, 698). The proliferation of technologies begun in earnest during the Age of Enlightenment continues today at an accelerated pace. Man has become more and more dependent on the technologies that have proliferated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, the technologies invented during the Enlightenment, and on display in Mason & Dixon, have advanced exponentially since that time: measurements can now be done in nanoseconds; the improvement of the precision and sophistication of firearms is staggering; and new celestial measuring tools allow man to plunge further and further into space revealing areas he heretofore did not know existed. The trend begun during the Age of Enlightenment, of knowledge impeding into the realm of the unknown, will continue to relegate faith to a narrower and narrower corner. As man continues his pursuit of

intellectual and moral superiority at the cost of faith, Nature, forever intractable, steadfast, and mysterious, will remain a conduit to, if not an “Age of Miracles,” then, at least, natural, linear relationships.

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<sup>i</sup> In their 1994 translation Richard Watson and Maya Rybalka translate the title as Man a Machine, while Ann Thomson in her 1996 edition of the text translates the title as Machine Man. All of La Mettrie’s quotes I take from Thomson’s edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Vaucanson’s mechanical duck stands as another instance of technology that becomes unwieldy. Taken as evidence with Emerson’s perpetual motion watch these failures of technology show that technology of the time does not provide absolute certainty. In this way technology fails to be the absolute sure thing that was to displace religion as something that provides such answers.

<sup>iii</sup> This is not the same as Emerson’s perpetual motion watch.

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