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Contents

he is and remains a model for all insurrectionary thought. For all action worthy of this name. The sole homage to which he would probably consent? That people read him and build on his work….

(Paul-Henri d') Holbach use it, avail themselves of it, but never give a citation. The baron (d'Hobach), author of *System of Nature*, publishes an abridged version of the work in 1772. He titles it: *The Good Sense of Curé Meslier,* not a word truly Meslier's. Likewise with Sylvain Maréchal who tries to make the famous work known in *The Cask of Diogenes,* then publishes *The Catechism of Curé Meslier* in which nothing of the curé's is written... Sade pillages d'Holbach who borrows so much from Meslier: pages of Sade's first book — *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Person* (1782) — but also in *Philosophy in the Boudoir,* which owes everything to the solitary of the Ardennes.

The ultras of the Enlightenment century drink at this source but remain quiet about their debt. Certain revolutionaries, less stingy, cite the great man: (Simon-Nicolas-Henri) Linguet, (Camille) Desmoulins, for example. On November 17, 1793 Anarchasis Cloots asks the National Convention to erect a statue in the Temple of Reason (a grotesque deist homage which Meslier probably would not have enjoyed...).

After the French Revolution people stop misunderstanding. Meslier can finally become what he is: atheist curé, revolutionary priest, materialist philosopher. The entire text, without retouching, or falsifications, appears finally thanks to Rudolf Charles d'Ablaing Van Giessenburg, under the name of Rudolf Charles, in 1864 in a three volume edition at Amsterdam. The title? *Testament of Jean Meslier.*

In 1919 the Bolsheviks engrave his name on an obelisk in Moscow. Meslier becomes a precursor of scientific socialism enrolled in the Soviet adventure! The Leninist empire regards him as a major philosopher and he occupies in Bolshevik historiography the place of Descartes in ours. Here is a new homage just as unbecoming as a statue in the Temple of Reason! After the checkmating of the libertarian sailors at Kronstadt by the Bolshevik power, Meslier becomes rather a model for insurrection and insubordination than a companion for the authorities. Because

I. Of a Certain Jean Meslier

How astonishing that the prevailing historiography finds no place for an atheist priest in the reign of Louis XIV. More than that, he was a revolutionary communist and internationalist, an avowed materialist, a convinced hedonist, an authentically passionate and vindictively, anti-Christian prophet, but also, and above all, a philosopher in every sense of the word, a philosopher proposing a vision of the world that is coherent, articulated, and defended step by step before the tribunal of the world, without any obligation to conventional Western reasoning.

Jean Meslier under his cassock contained all the dynamite at the core of the 18th century. This priest with no reputation and without any memorial furnishes an ideological arsenal of the thought of the Enlightenment's radical faction, that of the ultras, all of whom, drinking from his fountain, innocently pretend to be ignorant of his very name. A number of his theses earn for his borrowers a reputation only won by usurping his work. Suppressed references prevent the reverence due to him.

His work? Just a single book, but what a book! A monster of more than a thousand manuscript pages, written with a goose quill pen under the glimmer of the fireplace and candles in an Ardennes vicarage between the so-called Great Century and the one following, called the Enlightenment, which he endorsed, by frequent use of the word, the sealed fate of the 18th century. A handwritten book, never published during the lifetime of its author, probably read by no one other than by its conceiver. A book put out of shape, pillaged, travestied, mutilated after his death. A doomed book of a doomed author; a brilliant book by a brilliant thinker....

Jean Meslier was born January 15, 1664, in Mazerny in the Ardennes. This same year Louis XIV is giving fetes at Versailles in the chateau and the gardens. Marvelous and grandiose fetes with sumptuous expenditures, royal arrogance, a European demonstration of power and self-sufficiency. Moliere produces the first three

acts of *Tartuffe* there. The father (Louis XIV), has at his disposal a secure wealth: cultivation of the lands and domestic textile industry.

In 1678 a priest in his neighborhood teaches him Latin and, with his parents' agreement, anticipates, by leading the child right up to the seminary, that he might one day take the orders. Jean performs his studies adequately, without much passion, and without allying himself with his fellow students, while finding his true interest in reading Descartes. Unsurprisingly, he climbs the rungs of ecclesiastical ranks: sub-deacon March 29, 1687, deacon April 10, 1688, rural vicar, then priest January 7, 1689, at Etrépigny in the Ardennes; he spends forty years in this rectory, in a village of 165 inhabitants.

His superiors note him well. Without too much zeal, he performs the duties of his job, not without distinguishing himself by some unexpected behavior: often he asks no fee for the celebration of a marriage or for a funeral. At the end of the year, once his books were balanced, he distributes the rest to the poor of the commune. He lives, it seems, reasonably well on the revenue of two parishes and, perhaps, the rent for some plot of soil. Immersed in local life, he does not behave excessively. He likes his parishioners' kind of people — modest peasants, workers worn out by work — but without being unduly demonstrative. Outside the duties of his vicarage, he meditates, thinks, writes, works at his great work and passes a large part of his time studying the great masters in his library: Montaigne, whom he often cites in great detail, (Lucilio) Vanini, (Jean de) La Bruyère, (Etienne) La Boétie, still the major influences, but also other, more recent thinkers with whom he clashes : (Francois) Fénelon, (Blaise) Pascal, (Nicolas) Malebranche. Indeed, he gives equal time to the classic ancients: Seneca, Tacitus, Titus Livius (Livy), Flavius Josephus. And then the literature relevant to his job: the Bible. The Latin patrology [later published as a multi- volume edition by Jacques Migne — tr], the settled decisions of the Church Councils.

clearly sides with the kings and the princes, with the nobles and the bishops.

This philosopher of selective indignations has no words severe enough for the "ignorant tramps," the "canaille," the "populace" so many "cattle for whom a yoke, a goad, and a whip are necessary." Religion is necessary for slaves, not for thinkers. How could the whole work of the curé find favor in his eyes? Shameless, Voltaire fabricates a falsehood — trims, cuts, forgets, ignores and, under his pen, adds passages to make people believe that Meslier was, let us say, a Voltairean! Brave, but foolhardy, he attributes to the great dead man words which, in the mouth of another, permit him to escape Catholic and monarchist contumely. Under the title of *Extract of the Sentiments of Jean Meslier,* Voltaire publishes in 1761 a corrupt falsification of the work of Meslier. Certainly, he passes over in silence the atheism, the materialism, the communism, the revolution which makes too much noise already; he keeps the critique of religion, of miracles, of prophecies, of some Christian dogma; but, above all, he falsifies the proposals of the curé in order to transform him into an adept deist, like himself, with a natural religion … *In cauda venenum* (as a final blow), Voltaire concludes this text in stating that the work bears the "witness of a dying priest who asks God's pardon." Meslier asking God's pardon! Voltaire is raving… More repugnant one cannot be.

XXIV. Pillages and Posthumous Destiny

For a long time people would know Meslier only as Votairean drivel; Voltaire sent 300 copies to his friends, then paid out of his own pocket for a second, then a third edition, the evil was considerable — all the intellectual gain going to the anticlerical bigot. Meanwhile, copies of the original manuscript still exist. (Julien Offroy de) La Mettrie learns of another among them at the court of Frederick II of Prussia. (Claude-Adrien) Helvétius and

Among marquises, bankers, and the bewigged blue bloods, Voltaire hears of this treasure from Nicolas Thiriot, a friend from childhood. He indicates the existence of this dangerous philosophical object in a letter to him dated winter, 1735. Voltaire entrusts his correspondent to get a copy for him so that he can read it in its entirety. With enthusiasm, certainly, but with reserve, also.

Because Voltaire is neither the philosopher nor the man that people believe him to be, Meslier's atheism is repugnant to him; even more so his emancipatory politics. This artful opportunist, friend of the powerful, flatterer, interested in morality often to the point of fastidiousness, this egoist, this man is a deist yet keeping up with the Catholic religion in private, a relationship very much closer than one might expect from the usual biography of the public man who has become a national monument. He evidently does not like a priest who denies the existence of God and of all divinity; even more he reviles the radical condemnation of the fundamental system of all religion, repeated at length in the pages of the *Testament;* clearly, he detests the revolutionary and communist project.

The author of *Philosophical Letters* believes in God, cohabits with Catholics — even, and above all, when he signs his letters "Wipe out the infamy"… — writes pages of a rare violence against atheists, is anxious to obtain relics for the church he is having built on his property at Ferney, and to that end sends a humble request to the Pope, maintains on his own funds a chaplain for his chapel at Cirey, and at one time envisages his burial in a Catholic edifice built for this purpose .

This covert bigot does not at all like Meslier as one might think.

All the same, the defender of Calas, Sirven, and other well known causes conducive to the shaping of his statue, does indeed love liberty, but like a fancy dress occasion in worldly style. Because when it is a matter of the liberty of the people, of the little people, of those without rank, of the peasants, the country people, of the provincials bled white by his friends the powerful ones, he

II. An Atheist Curé

His biography does not glitter: Neither curé at the court, nor worldly parvenu, nor abbé who frequents salons, nor libertine for marchioness, still less a powdered curé dancing the gavotte with the nobility. True, we do hear of one or two trips to Paris, trips during which he might, indeed, have met Voltaire or some other great person of his epoch — but who would give his time to a dingy curé newly arrived from the Ardennes countryside, a curé without the burning ambition of a Eugene Rastignac [fictional Balzac arrivist — tr.]?

His life, so discreet on the outside, contrasts with the glowing heat inside. A volcano beneath a thick layer of ice. But from two or three glances at his existence, we catch a glimpse of the furnace. Anecdotes reveal the essential. In the philosophic life, everything has meaning. Such things appear here or there. In fact, it exposes the most intimate to the light. Thus, his generosity toward his parishioners bears witness to a man devoid of the spirit of lucre, entirely turned to his spiritual mission of Being, not Having.

But, equally, let us turn to another story: the curé Meslier lives with a young servant woman. He is 30 years old; she is 23. The religious council forbids a young maid for a curé. Go figure why! Before 40 years of age (the canonical age of consent of the church for a woman to perform this work), the pheromones lead the dance! The hierarchy orders him to separate from her. He replies that she is his niece… and refuses. We do not know the outcome of this affair, but he does it again, exactly on the same grounds: this time he is 55, she, 18. The same churchly anger, the same refusal to obey. Punishment falls: a month's retreat in a Reims monastery. Discreetly and secretly, the curé had to practice the joy of free love advocated in his work.

And then this other adventure, a sign that this curé without material interest, close to the people and not refusing the joy of youth, knows too how to show his aversion to the people of the nobility.

His sermons avowedly avoid even a form of the frantic apologia or Catholic edification. This curé, in a fragile relationship with God, presents the fables of his institution as an ethnologist would about a tribe to which he does not belong: "The Christians say that," "The Catholics think that," "The disciples of Christ affirm that," never does he mingle his own voice with the concert of bigots.

And one sermon resounds even today — because Jean Meslier calls a noble to account. Antoine de Toully — we know his name only by his noble title — mistreats his peasants. The curé before the assembled congregation, refuses to admit the lord to the service. In the same way, he forbids him from receiving incense and holy water. In other words, he declares war on the feudal lord.

The noble calls this to the attention of the bishop, who, as we might suspect, takes the side, as usual, of the blue blood. Meslier is reprimanded, recalled to the obedience. No matter, the following Sunday he asks his parishioners to pray, surely, but so that God might convert Antoine, enabling him to receive grace and not mistreat the poor or rob the orphan! For the petty nobleman present in his pew, this new affront does not pass unnoticed. Back goes the priest to the bishop's office. Thereafter, Meslier accumulates bad reports.

The relations are not settled during the lifetime of Toully — at his (Toully's) death, Meslier urges the prayers of the faithful for the deceased, but adds without malice the importance to pray for him so God would pardon him and permit him to expiate, in the other world, his numerous extortions down here against the poor and the orphans of the commune of Etrépigny. Persistent curé . . .

The intention appears to be laudable: to appeal to the judgment of God could well be justified, above all on the part of a priest, but this priest believes in neither God nor Devil; he abominates the Christian religion, laughs like a madman at the fables of devout Christians and the devoutly religious, as he says, of the life after death, of hell and of paradise, of the judgment of sins, of the judgment of souls: because the curé Meslier is an atheist, the first to

For local communalism to extend to the universal requires internationalization. Meslier thinks for the village, surely, but he does not conceive a resolution of problems solely on the level of the village association. "I will speak freely to the peoples of the earth," he writes, in inventing too the principle of exporting revolutionary values to the totality of the planet. Leon Trotsky will only have to re-read . . .

Atheist, deChristianizer, anarchist, communist, communalist, materialist, internationalist, revolutionary, leftist, and yet still a philosopher, Jean Meslier incarnates in himself the genius of the French Revolution. This sublime curé gathers together and concentrates in his sole personnage the open atheism of Anacharsis Cloots, the deChristianizing passion of Pierre Dolivier, the Homeric anger of Hébert, the republican virtue of Saint-Just, the communism among equals of Babeuf, the revolutionary incorruptibility of Robespierre, the passion for justice of Abbot Gregory, the Ultra rage of (Jean) Varlet, (Antoine-Francois) Momoro, or Jacques Roux, the "religion of the dagger" (Michelet) of Charlotte Corday, Marat's passion for the people, and the desire of "equality of enjoyment" of the Sans-Culottes… That such a man had ever existed — humanity is suddenly justified!

XXIII. Voltaire Robs Cadavers

Jean Meslier dies at the end of June, 1715. At his residence they discover the letter left to priests and the manuscript of the *Testament.* Till that date, no one had read it. This time bomb exists in four copies. With time, in the manner of the apostles, they are passed around and they multiply… Soon, the thick manuscript is sold expensively, very expensively clandestinely: more than 150 copies are circulating in Paris less than five years after the death of the philosopher.

smash the seats of power. In this line of reasoning, he clearly eulogizes tyrannicide. "Stun or stab all these detestable monsters and enemies of humankind," he writes… Vengeance? Not at all! Installation of a reign of justice and truth.

To this he links as well the abolition of private property. Fifty years before the Rousseau's critique of *Discourse On the Origin of Inequality Among People,* Meslier makes private possession and enjoyment of wealth responsible for all evil. Because with it, the most cunning, the craftiest, the meanest and the strong join forces to triumph over the poor and develop means of exploiting them.

Once private property is abolished, common wealth will be realized — "to enjoy in common." All that is obtained by work, the fruits of prosperity and of talent, will be treated as common goods of the commune. And the unit at a base? The family. But it is a cell, a link in the chain. By itself it does not constitute the goal of rural communism but its organizing kernel. The village ought to correspond to the family organization. And the villages, through legislation to maintain peace, create situations of social prosperity and happiness in common life. It is a prefiguration of the perpetual peace of the Abbot of St. Pierre — itself the model of Kant's notion.

Social hedonism proposes the happiness of all and of each individual. Not an ideal happiness, but a real one, concrete, pragmatic: to work, by which people can eat healthfully and sufficiently all the time, live and sleep in a decent and heated house, be nourished, be clothed, have the means to educate their children, and be cared for in case of illness.

In a century in which people survived miserably from day to day, covered with rags, sleeping in stables or on the dung of straw mattresses gnawed at by vermin, subsisting in penury or famine, the easy targets of epidemics, of pandemics, in such a century happiness ought to be concrete, susceptible of being realized here and now. A little later Saint-Just will say that "happiness is a new idea in Europe": Meslier signs the birth certificate of this powerful thought.

affirm so clearly, radically, and markedly that God does not exist, that religion depends on fraud, and that a post-Christian philosophy is needed.

III. A Philosophic Bomb

When the unfortunate Jean Meslier joins in death the aristocrat of Etrépigny, he leaves behind him a philosophical work that one can, without risk of exaggeration, compare to a bomb. Indeed, the *Testament* is a time bomb. His precise timing aims to produce the maximum amount of damage to the targets clearly defined: God, the Catholic religion, priests, monks, Jesus Christ, the prophets, the Church, the authorities — kings and princes, emperors and popes, tyrants, nobles, diverse parasites, people of justice, and other powerful men of this world.

Whom does this curé who is not even Catholic bless? The poor, the miserable, those without rank, the victims, the peasants, the workers, the exploited, the humiliated, the offended, but also the women, the children, without forgetting those who feel — the animals who submit above all to the wickedness of humans. His faction? The side of every living creature whose right to exist peacefully and quietly is denied.

This bomb aims at an explosion and a new clean slate. Nevertheless, the proposal of Jean Meslier is not nihilistic. To destroy, certainly, but in order to construct or reconstruct. This drive to be done with the old world is sixty years away from the first jolts of the French Revolution and acts as a preparatory moment for a new world. His dialectical thought — even if the dialectic often gets lost in the digressions of a rococo exposition — begins for the first time in the West a post-Christian aspiration. To think *against* Christian teachings, surely, but above all *after* them.

Atheism does not constitute an end in itself, but a beginning, a necessary base, an ethical foundation. Meslier negates the princi-

ple of God in order to arrive at a caring morality of a joyful body, of happy existence, of peaceful relations between beings and between the sexes. His ethical concern unfolds and defines him as a political communalist. This unpublished curé invents communism, indeed, anarchism.

The curé Meslier remains the man of a single book, this famous *Testament* — the name by which we know him: in fact, *Memoir of the Thoughts and Feelings of Jean Meslier,* or, to be more precise: *Memoir of the Thoughts and Feelings of J... M... Prie... Cur... of Estrep... and of Bal... On an Exposition of Errors and of Abuses of the Behavior and of the Government of Men, where We See clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Gods and of All the Religions of the World in Order to Be Addressed to His Parishioners After His Death and in Order to Serve As Witness of Truth to Them, and to All Like Them. In His Testimony to the People.* Henceforth abridged as *Testament.*

He also leaves annotations, in his own handwriting, of *The Demonstration of the Existence of God* by (Francois) Fénelon (known under the title *Anti- Fénelon)* and the *Reflections on Atheism* of the Jesuit (Jean de) Tournemire, but nothing more than his scathing attack contains. On the other hand, accompanying his big manuscript, he writes a letter to the curés of his neighborhood. In twenty pages he proposes an excellent synthesis rather more attractive than the thousand pages of the somewhat stodgy Testament.

IV. The Essays of an Atheist

Meslier writes this manuscript by hand, with a goose quill pen, in the feeble light of a candle, in the evening, after the priestly obligations. Looking ahead, he makes four copies to avoid the loss of the fruit of forty years of readings, meditations, analyses, reflection

Despite his isolation, the leftist priest is already sadly aware of the absence of intellectuals on the terrain of revolutionary anger and their absence from the companionship of the wretched of the earth. Some decades later the ultras of the Enlightenment will realize his theoretical dream with the Enragés, the Sans Culottes, the Hébertists or Hébert's companion in arms the curé Jacques Roux, one of the famous leftists of 1789, and verify Meslier's ideas, this time here on earth, in the streets of the cities, in Paris as in the provinces. [Jacques Roux led the Enragés — leftist workers — in food riots in 1793 — tr.]

XXII. What Kind of Revolution?

What sort of revolution does the *Testament* propose? How is it to be done? And to bring about what new order? First of all, the method: insurrection, rebellion, refusal to submit. In his library, the curé Meslier has the (La Boétie's excellent 1548*) Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* in which he marks theses and ideas: A fact: power exists only with the consent of those upon whom they exercise their power; a solution: stop giving them your blessing, they will fall immediately.

The political categorical imperative of Montaigne's friend is clear, and his effectiveness formidable: "Be resolute in no longer serving and presto you will be free," Meslier takes up again the idea: give nothing more to the rich, exclude them from your society, leave them out of your world in refusing to give them what they pretend that you owe them. The curé does not spell it out concretely, but he invents the civil disobedience dear to the heart of Henry David Thoreau; stop paying taxes, refuse the feudal rent, say no to the salt tax, rebel against forced labor.

The revolutionary project does not stop at this Boétian dynamic of resistance. Meslier adds to this first phase of active and dynamic force, the deliberate will to unite to overturn established order and

nicious fables, peddle nonsensical ideas, yet one owes them an important thing: they transmit values and virtues.

Meslier's colleagues teach morality, and this is a necessary thing, capital even, in "every well regulated republic." In summoning all to goodness, the priests work for "the public welfare," hence they can be supported by public funds because they merit a salary and are not parasites like the others… The French Revolution by inviting these church people to take the constitutional oath in 1790 will subscribe to this spirit!

XXI. A Gramscian under Louis XIV

The leftist priest reasons in this way about a virtuous republic and of the necessity for it to act in relation with those who are, for want of a word, it is not yet conventional to call the *intellectuals* — a neologism created by Clemenceau at the time of the Dreyfus Affair… Meslier speaks of people of wit, of orators, of the wisest and the most enlightened — a regular phrase under his pen.

What can one, what ought one to expect from them? In the Gramscian model, the revolution begins by a militancy of ideas on a daily basis: to write, speak, talk, spread vital ideas: to establish an inventory of how they stand, to isolate the causes of poverty and exploitation, to enlighten the people on the functioning of the feudal machinery, to tell them that one can change the things and the order of the world by a revolution.

The travelers on the road to revolution ought above all "to excite the people to rescue them from the insupportable bondage of tyrants." Meslier believes in "the sole light of human reason" and in the dynamic effects of "natural reason." Could only one person, all alone, without friends, without connections, in the depths of the Ardennes, in the vicarage of a country curé, formulate any better the ideal of the Enlightenment as it will appear a half-century later?

where some ill-intentioned person, a henchman of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, could throw its body into the hearth.

This book requires ten years of clandestine work between 1719 to 1729, when Meslier is between 50 and 60 years old — the age at which death puts a period to his enterprise. Surely, he has time to finish it, but he indicates in the course of his exposition, that with time pressing on him, he confesses he has written in eagerness and haste. Probably pricked by the violent desire to resolve the contradiction which has consumed him for so long: having to teach vain and frivolous propositions which he does not believe, having to lie and to deceive people to sell belief in another world, which he knows does not exist… The curé confides that this double role repels him at the deepest level. The humiliating tension is resolved in the work which sublimates it.

Why does he not renounce these falsities during his lifetime? In an incredible manner, this Prometheus kills God on paper, ravages religions, puts to the fire all the conventional philosophies, destroys political fortresses, spares nothing and no one who resembles from near or afar a figure of authority; he confesses plainly his reasons: for not renouncing publicly — he wishes to avoid harming his parents, his family, his near ones.

And then, prudently, he adds: to avoid also the annoyances associated with a public retraction. The Catholic Church has the pyre handy, the enduring persecution. The curé wants, he writes, *to live tranquilly.* Might this be the price of this double game — a double ego — which illustrates superbly the libertine logic suppressed on the outside under laws and customs of his country, yet in the interior absolutely free, radically free, totally free.

But this tension within a solitary person in the Ardennes with no help from the philosophical community practiced by baroque libertines in Parisian salons, has probably produced unbearable problems of conscience, nameless psychological grief, and mental suffering which only the writing of the *Testament* — like a madman

crying a violence which he keeps inside himself — could little by little lessen.

The fact that the manuscript arises from a desire to go beyond personal psychological contradiction does not invalidate its theses . On the other hand, the form of the work bears witness to the forces acting both against the writing and against the writer. In the manner of Montaigne — often cited and much admired — Meslier finds himself entirely within his book: he makes it, then is made by it, he is the matter even of his own book, he relies on it, he constructs it in speaking silently, the *Testament*? The Montaigne *Essays* of an atheist.

The priest without God dies June 28 or 29, 1729. The cadaver clearly offends the Catholic hierarchy, since they have unsealed the letters and taken cognizance of these voluminous packs of darkened pages. The Church makes the corpse disappear, it knows how, and buries the curé in the vicarage garden. No tomb, no plaque, no distinctive sign. No need for the name of the apostate to figure on the Catholic registry — the love of one's neighbors and the forgiveness of sins have limits . . .

In his major work Meslier envisages his postmortem destiny. Coherent, he knows that in this state conscience finds itself annihilated along with the matter of the brain. Thereafter, all suffering becomes impossible. Nothing happens at death except decomposition. In the manner of Diogenes, he states that they can do what they want to do with his corpse: eat it, cook it; fricassee it; boil it, roast it, little matter what. Surely, he cannot imagine that the vicarage garden will one day be integrated into the property of the lord of the manor! Meslier lies today — no one knows exactly where — in the ground of descendants of Antoine de Toully! But neither that, nor the rest, he need no longer to be truly angry at him!

XX. The Church Supports Tyrants

In the logic of Meslier's reasoning, the Catholic church makes possible the tyranny of the kings and princes of the moment. Paul of Tarsus has said and said again: all power comes from God; to resist or rebel is to resist and rebel against God. The spiritual power of priests supports the temporal power of kings in order to enslave the people. The tonsured heads and the crowned heads rely on the threat of eternal damnation post mortem, and play on the existential fears in order to nourish servitude.

First of all, the kings call themselves the envoys of God; then they carry out a deft maneuver and affirm that they are actual gods. Since the clergy do not deny it, and worse, they confirm it, the little people, terrified of the judgment of God, his anger and his habitual talent for punishment, are willing to kneel to the people of the court who form one single family.

The curés, priests, abbots, bishops, the pope, but also the king and all his court, then the auxiliaries in the most backward corners of the provinces act to in order to create, preserve, and fortify religious mystifications. Religion exists only through deceit; it generates deceptions, politics. The saber and the instrument for sprinkling holy water make a good pair. Catholicism and the monarchy "get along with each other like two peas in the pod."

Meslier attacks the monks and the abbesses, ridiculously clothed and living in the abbeys where money, food, and drink are not lacking. The kitchen gardens and pleasure grounds are magnificent. Their farms generate big profits. And this he labels injustice, seeing how these parasites enjoy all their goods because they plunder that which "the good workers ought to have."

But oddly (!) Jean Meslier indicts those who renounce, they who live the monastic life and the regular and secular priests — abbots, priors, canons — while he excuses the bishops and curés of the countryside… Surely these people with their institution teach per-

bles also want to see the poor grovel. This situation creates hatred between people. The class struggle produces hatred between classes. What philosopher was thinking like this as early as a little after 1700? What potential revolutionary, lawyer here, tax collector there, great landowner elsewhere, would have acquiesced to these ideas at this time? Meslier is a visionary . . .

XIX. A Eudemian Republic (Eudemus of Rhodes)

Such institutional inequality contradicts and is contrary to natural equality. Meslier believes in natural law. Not that of the Christians (their religion transformed the laws of nature into its own cultural law) but that of judicial naturalists — whom he has probably not read. (Hugo) Grotius, (Baron Samuel von) Pufendorf… — according to whom people naturally by the law of life have each day the right to nourish themselves, to clothe themselves, to house themselves, to assure a decent education for their children, but also to enjoy their natural liberty, then to work for public usefulness and the common welfare of all.

In order to end with the state of deplorable conditions produced by the French monarchy with the help of the Catholic clergy, the leftist curé appeals to human rights and to the law: good laws can make people good. If in the state of nature — he does not use that expression — people submit to violent law in the struggle for existence, the state of civilization ought by law to allow the realization of justice. Meslier sets two objectives: ”public welfare” and a project for ”living happily.”Otherwise known as a Eudemian republic.

V. A Rococo Architecture

The *Testament* proposes new proofs developed in 97 chapters of various lengths and of problematic arrangement. Its structure is not easily perceived; the constructions slips away; the internal architecture does not manifest itself at first glance — or at the second. Parts overlap, subjects interpenetrate. Not that clarity is missing — the text is never complex even at the most arduous moments dealing with materialist ontology, but the essential vanishes under the incidental. Thought is hidden in the development.

The *Testament* recalls an oral philosophy in the manner of the *Essays* of Montaigne: the book could have been copied by dictation to a patient and abetting scribe. Reading Meslier is *hearing* his imprecation coming down from the pulpit from which he would have liked to convoke post-mortem all his parishioners. The text resembles that of an inflamed sermon, a glowing Philippic, an endless monologue, a flowing discourse which nothing can stop, so great the anger motivating this radical logic.

And, as in all soliloquies, repetition reigns, the style becomes redundant, Meslier speaks in his writing and becomes intoxicated, he uses words repeatedly, but he also duplicates entire expressions. He recopies certain sentences or certain proofs. Imprecation continues to form the base, and variations are sometimes superimposed. The ensemble triumphs as a rococo monument where the indispensable and the useless are mixed with extravagant overlays.

Surely the cathartic function of the work explains its jumbled nature. The disorder concerns only the exposition of ideas, the construction, the structure — the form. Never the foundation. No obscurity, no new words, no taste for the hazy, so dear to the philosophic professionals. The pen goes right to the goal. No leftovers from classicism, no vocabulary of the philosophic caste or of its accomplice, the religious cult. Meslier throws himself into the work, rushes, accelerates, he acts like a driven man, knowing as a philoso-

pher that death can prevent him from bringing his great work to a conclusion.

But the purifying logic of writing does not explain by itself the main allure of the edifice. We have to reckon equally with the spirit of the times, the zeitgeist. The *Testament* recalls the rococo, surely, but in two senses of the term: the conventional sense — loaded, crowded, luxuriant, profuse — but also the aesthetic sense relative to the first years of the eighteenth century. The philosopher does not escape the color of the times, a book, even a didactic book, obeys the same laws as every other work of art.

What does the history of art tell us? The rococo is characterized by ornamental exuberance, broken or wavy lines, the dialectic play of curves and counter-curves, profusion, asymmetry and absence of symmetry, the content stretched out, softened, the presence of those famous rocailles, whence rococo gets its name, but also chicory, vines, and garlands… All that corresponds to the form of the work. Like Montaigne's (baroque) *Essays*, which proceed from *leaps* and *capers*, the (rococo) *Testament* results in a semblance of a Dionysian dance. Apollo does not appear there, at least in its style.

Let us go further and try to define rococo architectural technique beyond just a cut and dried inventory. In architecture, the motifs of rococo style are located in places of access: window openings, joining together of dissimilar arcs, transitions between walls and archways. Hence the frets and curves which go back and forth and entwine with each other, blotting out the structural lines of the building. The same is true in the curé's big book: citations, references, repetitions, recurrent motives cover over the stages of the argument in an ebullition which clogs the progression of thought.

Surely, the eight proofs can each be summed up in a clear sentence, but often, the part concerned with a single line of synthesis is shunted to the side by graftings on the teaching stem. Let us try, all the same. First, *proof of futility and falseness of religions*: they contradict each other. Second, faith — *blind belief* — enters

the man's thought revealed by the current running through his text, Meslier prepares for that revolution a century in advance! Nothing less . . .

Among the pages of the work, if we search for political gems to organize them together into a revolutionary jewel, we would begin with what resembles a philosophy of the Estates General. Meslier paints in detail a picture of peasant manners and suffering under the feudal regime of Louis XIV, for whom he does not have words fierce enough to paint him: great thief, great criminal, great killer, great exploiter, guilty of ravages, carnage, war, usurpation, *thefts*, desolation, nameless injustices, famines. Through the sixty-two years of his long rule (1643-1715) the provinces bled white experienced nothing but misery and poverty. Even (Francois) Fénelon thought so and wrote it in a sublime letter . . .

Jean Meslier invents the visibility of the class struggle. On one side, the peasants, the workers, the poor, the wretched, the people suffering at work, strangled with multiple taxes and fees, mentally, spiritually, physically, enslaved every day; on the other side, the priests and the kings, the bishops and the princes, the gendarmes and the people of justice — he writes, "people of injustice" and names them: notaries, prosecutors, lawyers, clerks of the court, controllers, stewards of the police, sergeants, judges, the powerful accomplices of offenders — the fee collectors, the tax collectors, and the other "vile rats of the cave," the nobles, the "rich idlers," who play with the goods of this world, eating, drinking, dancing, joking, diverting themselves and laughing in the salons. These powerful people avail themselves of the most beautiful lands, the most beautiful houses, the most beautiful inheritances; they live from their rents and from taxes violently levied on the workers — which does not prevent them from always wanting more and more.

The former have nothing; the latter everything. The former are deprived of all and deserve everything; the others control it all and deserve to have nothing; soon they will also deserve being dispossessed of their goods. Although glutted and sated, the wealthy no-

organizes differently the distribution of wealth and property. If there exists a state of nature in which violence reigns a priori, for mechanical reasons, a state of culture can remedy it in proposing new systems of ethological organization, hence social communalism. So a political workshop can come into being . . .

XVIII. Philosophy of the Estates General

Meslier is inventive also on political terrain because he formulates for the first time a social and political hedonism. Before him, there had been Eudemianism, hedonism as well, but they remained above all an affair of the individual. It's up to each person to fashion his own happiness and joy. If there is a politics of the Epicureans, cynics, Cyrenaics (for whom pleasure is the highest good — tr.), it is rather marginal, reached indirectly by extrapolation, and certainly not the central issue. Montaigne does not expect from his politics a realization of his own happiness or even that his politics might contribute to it. Gassendi likewise. But Meslier, does.

Atheist, materialist, hedonist, Meslier locks up his system with the promotion of an *international communalism* somewhat self-contradictory since it depends on the village cell, while aiming toward a planetary revolution. We have spoken accurately of a *communism* and of a *pre-socialism*, equally correct, or of a *libertarian communism*, which seems to me more exact. But each of these terms is used today through the deforming prism of what has become of these ideas during two centuries of history: neither Marx nor Bakunin, neither Engels nor Proudhon, neither Lenin nor Stalin allows us to understand Meslier's concepts; it is better to read Meslier in his own right and in the context of his epoch. Without ever forgetting that seventy years separate the first pages of the *Testament* from the first movement of the French Revolution…. If one judges less by the overt influence than by

into contradiction with the *natural light of reason.* Third, the visions of prophets are the work of madmen. Fourth, prophecies are never fulfilled. Fifth, Christian morality contradicts all that nature teaches. Sixth, the Christian religion acts as the accomplice of political tyrannies. Seventh, atheism is an idea as old as the world. Eighth, the soul is mortal, an idea also as old as the previous one.

But, indeed, each proof contains sometimes a summing up of this or that other one, bits taken again *in extenso* in a demonstration against the current. Sometimes one re-reads entire pages. In a nearly fractal manner, each of the contents and the development of a single moment recalls the totality of the contents. A self-contained work, the *Testament* functions within itself because it develops themes and theorizes a vision of a coherent and systematic world — despite the apparent formal chaos.

VI. Intestines of Curés, Guts of Nobles

This rococo form contains nuggets. Deep down are diamonds, which one must have the patience to go look for at the cost of a close, rigorous, determined reading. In this castle of multiple rooms where we get lost often during the first reading, there does exist a decipherable project: an ethic of happiness and how to get there: a politics of communalism. Meslier invents and proposes a social hedonism, he projects into a collective dimension a jubilation that for a long time was an individual matter — let us recall Epicurus or Montaigne. And for the first time in history.

People are often unaware that a sentence, having had its hour of glory on the wall in the Latin Quarter, May, '68, sprang, despite its paraphrasing in the spirit of the time, from the famous *Testament.* On a wall of the Sorbonne a graffiti announced: *When the last social philosopher is strangled by the intestines of the last bureaucrat, will we still have problems?* This young man painting on the wall knew Meslier in recalling the proposal of a man of the people who wished

that "all the great ones of the earth and all the nobles might be hanged and strangled with the intestines of the last priest . . ." The young man who wrote his curses borrows it, surely, and signs his agreement with the priest.

The red priest remains in the annals of holy anger and permanent indignation. He regrets, for example, not having at his disposal either the muscular arms of Hercules — a model for cynical Greeks — or his club, or his force, or his courage in to stun the kings, the tyrants, the priests — *ministers of error and iniquity* and all the exploiters of the peoples of the earth who produce social injustice. *To purge the vices of the world,* there is his project. 1789 will give body to his plan with the outcome that we all know . . .

The ethics of happiness presupposes a prior job of destruction of Christianity. Well before the cultural revolution of Year II of the Revolution and the robust rage of the Hébertists, Meslier undertakes de-Christianization on ideological grounds. From them comes not only total war against Christian theology, Catholic morality, but also Cartesian philosophy, which he perceives quite well as the fellow traveler of devout Christians.

After having burned the Christian boats, he reconstructs a new fleet: a materialist ontology, a morality based on that of Eudemus of Rhodes and a post-Christian philosophy. To which he gives a pragmatic dimension by elaborating and inaugurating a new politics: after atheism, the priest invents, among a thousand other things, the class struggle, communism, anarchism, the international revolution, collective disobedience, public welfare. The ideologists of the French Revolution will only have to bend down to gather the red and black flowers of the *Testament.*

is not to fear, the sole significance is that which has taken place before it during life. The materialist ontology legitimizes the Eudemian ethic which is deployed in a communist politics. (Eudemus of Rhodes)

XVII. A Natural History of Evil

Meslier clearly does not believe in original sin as the cause of evil on the planet. Negativity does not come down from the sky, it climbs up from the earth. In contemporary terms, one could say that he furnishes an ethnological genealogy of evil. His version avoids metaphysics, ignores theology, and bypasses traditional ontology; it offers a coherent theory of the materialist and atheist option of the curé.

Where does evil come from? From the fact that too many people occupy at the same time a too small territory. The scarcity inseparable from the narrowness of the territory forces people to fight to obtain what they need to live and to survive. All means are good which permit people to assure their existence: tricks, perfidy, meanness, violence, and other strategies of resourcefulness.

No doubt about it, Meslier does not take the paths of theodicy in order to justify evil. There again he spins his metaphor: evil is necessary because it permits a kind of social homeostasis (internal stability). If there were no murder, murder between species, a dangerous proliferation of humans or other animals would swallow up space. In this equilibrium, nothing dominates, no one holds the monopoly of plunder, everything ends with coexistence in a harmony permitting all to be and to endure.

This natural conception of evil — or this conception of natural evil… — does not present the fatalistic character of original sin. It is not an indelible mark. The mechanism which produces it is reduced to redistributing, on which one can act. Hence, the penury naturally generated by the constraints of space can vanish if one

ness, all those constitute variations on the materialist theme. We are unaware of the reasons for *this* rather than *that*, but *this* and *that* proceed from a working out of matter. Meslier speaks of "the continual fermentation of being" without further elaboration.

Without scientific knowledge — like every other curé educated in the seminary — without reference books in physics and biology at hand, without resources to observation of the infinitely small, without conversation with fellow scientific friends, Meslier can hardly go further in postulating the dynamic of matter, which, even today is far from having delivered all its secrets. From his metaphor of fermentation, let us grasp a faulty approximation containing all the same the truth of a materialism that is vital, dynamic, dialectic (not in the political sense of the word).

To give some organization to matter, Meslier states that in nature there exists only time, place, space, and expanse. Time has not been created — either by God, who does not exist, or by whatever else; because the very act of creation presupposes a time to unfold and occur. A period before time makes time impossible since nothing can precede it — otherwise it is already in time… Time has been there always "like an invisible point which is without any extension."

Place, space, and expanse — Meslier establishes their relative identity. Place? "A space or a limited expanse which contains a body." Space? "An expanse more spacious which contains or which can contain several bodies." Expanse? "A space without limits and without end which contains all the beings, all the places, and all the imaginable spaces." Outside of these modalites of space, time, and matter; there is nothing.

From that, let us conclude with the Epicurians: if all is matter, that includes the soul. Thus the soul dies at the same time as the body. The brain, which contains a person's world and makes conscience possible, also decomposes. And the world and conscience with it. Nothing to fear, therefore, of death and of what follows afterward. Afterward? Nothing. Matter metamorphoses. Death

VII. Fire Against Devout Christians and the Devoutly Religious

The curé Meslier proposes the first atheist thinking in Western history. Too often people take atheism for what it is not. Protagoras' conclusions about gods lead us to say nothing about them, neither whether they exist, nor whether they don't exist. That is agnostic, not atheist. Epicurus, Lucretius, and the Epicureans affirm multiple gods, established in a subtle manner, situated in the between-worlds. That is polytheism, not atheism; Spinoza maintains the coincidence of God with Nature. (Lucilio) Vanini and (Giordano) Bruno think the same. That is pantheism, not atheism. (Pierre) Charron, (Francois de)La Mothe Le Vayer, (Charles de) Saint Evremond, and other baroque libertines believe sacrificing to the Catholic religion is necessary because that is the religion of their country; they avoid dwelling on the nature of God, but do they believe in Him? That is a Christianity turned Epicurean, heterodox with regard to the Vatican, surely, but not atheism; Voltaire cries out the useful and indispensable character of a Great Watchmaker in view of the superb mechanism of Nature: Rousseau agrees with that. That is deism, not atheism. An atheist denies clearly the existence of God; he does not refine definitions.

Atheism probably goes against the grain for common people incapable of theorizing their world view. But, unless I am mistaken, the *Testament* manifests for the first time in history this idea of a universe rid of God, an idea which induces a coherent world view — immanent and materialist. The exact date is unknown, but it is somewhere between 1719 and 1729. Jean Meslier writes: "There is no God." (II, 150) *Ite missa est.* (The Mass is over. — tr.)

Not yet. The mass is not finished because it remains to be said. The book acts in the manner of a great atheist sermon in an address to his parishioners abused by his own fault. In the urgency of coming to a conclusion and getting rid of a great guilt accumulated dur-

ing so many years, Meslier accumulates propositions, adds proof upon proof at the risk of saying one time, two times, ten times the same thing. The book improvises as if it were an oral communication. The text speaks; Meslier does not express himself as one would do in a book, but the book speaks like the curé Meslier.

To every lord every honor. Fire on God. Meslier abandons what is said customarily about this and demonstrates that these many definitions constitute a tissue of contradiction. All Christians affirm that: God is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient; he created the world and humans, he is Providence. Putting this into perspective with reality proves that he has none of these qualities. The world itself, as Meslier goes on to prove, is evidence of the nonexistence of God.

Examples:

God's kindness? What shall we make of all the places in the Holy Scriptures which show him as jealous, angry, vindictive, aggressive, wicked, demanding, unjust, capricious, and of other human qualities all too human? Is it goodness when God judges men, in certain cases, to eternal damnation, to the fire of hell forever and for some unimportant sin? Is it goodness that allows evil when he could prevent it and produce only good? Come on . . .

Omnipotent? But where does all the misery of the wretched, the poverty of the poor on this planet come from? Why do wicked men exist? How do we explain the invention of evil when it would be sufficient for God just not to want it, then there would be a paradise on earth? And the exploitation of men, the social injustices, the whole complicity of the powerful ones with the Church, what justification is there for all that?

Merciful? Same remarks as about God's kindness: this God creates a Hell, sends unbaptised dead children into Limbo and deprives them of paradise, inflicts purgatory in the case of the undetermined; he expresses so much anger in punishing blindly, in rewarding vice and punishing virtue, this God looks to be the exact opposite of mercy . . .

its strengths and its weaknesses — revealing his originality and his theoretical limits.

This matter is defined negatively: it is not the extensive substance of Descartes. In his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), the philosopher of Poitiers states that the material world assumes length, breadth, and depth; it is infinitely divisible in parts, but not on the atomic principle; the parts differ by their size, types, places, and movements. Meslier refuses this definition. Matter furnishes, first of all, the explanatory principle of the totality of Nature.

Certainly, we could ask Meslier to specify. He affirms the clear but undefinable principle, undefinable because, no more than the eye can see itself, matter which thinks cannot seize to define that which it thinks. In the same way that there exists a relation of causality between the eye and vision, the limbs and the movement, the brain and thought, there exists a relation between matter and nature, but, in the actual state of our awareness, he states, one cannot say what or how.

The same questions concern us today, but honesty within the limits of reason is more valuable than straightforward irrational delirium. Better an admission of impotence to the credit of reason and of the philosopher who recognizes limits, than a false reason which has recourse to sophisms, to a specious rhetoric, hence the *cogito* of Descartes. Before Meslier, (Pierre) Gassendi had already opposed common sense to *cogito*, that mammoth of world philosophic literature.

Reality, nature, being, matter, there is the equation of the world. Working it out follows combinations, movements, configurations, modifications, arrangements, variations of the constituent parts of matter. At this moment it appears legitimate to affirm: matter feels, thinks, reflects, desires, loves. Let us stop saying: *I think, therefore I am*; let us rectify it instead: *matter thinks, therefore matter is.*

All that exists is reduced to a particular configuration of matter: life and death, virtue and vice, beauty and ugliness, health and sickness, pleasure and grief, joy and sadness, strength and weak-

the atheist curé lights the fires of his philosophic anger and fires the ontological consequence of his immanent metaphysical position: God does not exist; there is only matter. All that exists is a single substance which coincides exactly with matter. Without having read him, Meslier follows Spinoza's swerve from which he produced such considerable results: the French materialist genealogy of the eighteenth century. A single substance: matter.

Atheism intellectually compels this position. The only option possible for every philosopher who denies transcendence, dualism, spiritualism, idealism, and all the bric-a-brac of other worlds that define all religions; materialism opens a fresh avenue for philosophy: the world here and now, down here, the real, the concrete, the life of every day. First of all understand it, then transform it.

XVI. A Materialist Ontology

Meslier's materialist ontology constitutes the counterpart of spiritualist Christian theology. God does not exist because only Being exists, and Being is Nature. We avail ourselves of this certitude of Being by the simple fact of being. Meslier proposes a genre of Descartes' tautological "Cogito, ergo sum": if I am, I cannot question being — at least with a pure game of spirit replaced by a Pyrrhic game. (Note: Pyrrho was a Greek skeptic — tr.) The sole thought of being proves being. No need of metaphysics; good sense suffices.

The curé does not enter into the detail of the constituents of matter that define being. We don't find, with him, a physics of atoms, a description of particles, a mechanics of molecular arrangements, a theology of clinamen (deviation): the name of Epicurus does not appear in the *Testament. Lucretius' On the Nature of Things* is not found in his library, nor Epicurus' *Letters*, nor even any Diogenes Laertius, who would make up for those absences: Meslier conceives the sole world, and his materialism owes to his situation

Invulnerable, inaccessible? Then why is God vexed if someone commits a lie, desires his neighbor's wife, if someone does not honor his father or his mother — mere trifles however, taking into consideration as justification for his anger. What good does it do to invoke him, pray to him, ask favors of him, desire his intercession for our little self and our small affairs, if no communication is possible with him?

This God wants us to love him, but he never manifests himself. A straightforward, clear and incontestable appearance ought to be in his power. How can we love a power that we fear, a power that makes himself dreaded, and that we finally come to detest him so great is his cruelty manifested upon the most innocent people who bear the blows of fate? He wants obedience, but never makes his will clearly known.

Meslier does not develop an analysis of the human fabrication of God. He does not show, like Feuerbach, that this fiction is fabricated by men who fear death, dread nothingness and invent no matter what in order to live despite their cramped, limited, and finally brief existence. He does not explain why God is the fundamental fiction of human impotence turned inside out like fingers of a glove and venerated under a sole power as desirable powers might be: people cannot know all, are unaware of the psychological omnipresence, they are born, live, grow old, die and disappear into the void. To live with all this powerlessness, the same people venerate omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, the eternal, the one who was not created, the incorruptible, the immortal given to the qualities of a divinity who is one as man is one.

But Meslier reclaims a continent never embarked upon, unexplored; we cannot ask him to finish in one stroke and in one instant the atheist monument… His negation, his dismantling, his proposition to read God as a fiction — there is the essential. Dozens of philosophers ponder this idea; they avoid proposing it openly; they come to terms with heaven and reason; they have the intelligence and the good sense to compose still and despite all with this fiction.

It is for Meslier to announce for the first time philosophically the death of God.

VIII. The First Deconstruction of Christianity

If Meslier is the first atheist philosopher, he also holds another glorious title: he shines equally in the sky of ideas for his mastery of the first deconstruction of Christianity. God after all is one matter, religion another, and the Christian concept a third. Atheist, he excels also as an atheistic ideologue who knows how to dismantle the gears of the Christian machine in order to show its fictitious character.

Surely, there is a precedent in Richard Simon (1638-1712) living obscurely in his library, a Norman curé who discovers biblical exegesis and writes a great number of works, some in several volumes, including three major histories critical of the New Testament in its different versions and its principal commentators. (Jacques-Benign) Bossuet and the Jesuits did everything to make life impossible for this incorruptible priest who believed himself able to unite reason and the Christian texts. He falls seriously ill… Richard Simon dies of grief, they say; his manuscripts are burned… During this epoch Meslier goes on working on his magnus opus.

Like Richard Simon, Jean Meslier reads scrupulously those texts called sacred, but with an identical care for pagan texts. To read the *Gospels* like Tacitus' *Annals?* A mortal sin during this epoch. The Ardennes curé has at his disposal the Latin Fathers of the Church and the *Bible* in his library; he can read carefully and establishes that, in the inspired texts, dictated by God, contradiction reigns; in fact contradictions abound, absurdities overflow, and lies teem.

To begin with, Meslier affirms a rare thing during this epoch: the pollution of the source of all Christian myth. The Scriptures are not reliable. Falsified, patched together, and functioning only for political interests, established into an allegedly coherent corpus, in

Christians, the conservatives, the authors of a hazy style, lovers of abstruse vocabulary and of neologisms, strung like pearls. Meslier is a poor match, he who flaunts his atheism clearly, his materialism, his communism, all in a rather vernacular language in which one searches in vain for any trace of the vocabulary of the philosopher tribe. And so much better . . .

His atheism we have seen. Now, his materialism. As Meslier innovates in affirming the non-existence of God, he invents all in creating a French materialism out of whole cloth. Certainly (Pierre) Gassendi came before him. We know the Christian limits of the atomism of the canon of Digne: all is matter, absolutely all, except for the soul… Epicurus is entirely right, except when Christianity makes him wrong… Let us grant it, he deserves credit for the materialism in question.

We must remember that the curé Meslier lives for forty years in the vicarage of a little village in the Ardennes, never left. Let us be clear that he works in his personal library with only a handful of books, less than fifty; let us add that he performs conscientiously the absorbing daily tasks of the priest, at least on the surface.

Let us put it differently: Meslier does not frequent any worldly Parisian salon like the one, a few years later of Baron Holbach where one would meet sometimes at the same table such great thinkers as Hume, Rousseau, Condorcet, Helvétius, Voltaire, d'Alembert, Diderot… Meslier has no street he can cross to leave his house and find himself in a magnificent public or private library… Meslier does not live on the revenue of a tax collector or on the rent of the nobility… Alone, without references and resources and without leisure, the sheer extent of his work of discovery constitutes a feat. Let us imagine what the productions of this spirit might have been under more favorable conditions.

It is thus with his intelligence alone, his pen and his tallow candles that Meslier without commentaries, without the support of the thought of others, grounds the basis of precise and detailed materialism to combat the metaphysics of Descartes.. As a lone herald,

XIV. The Massacre of Cats

Jean Meslier deplores that the Christian metaphysics and the Cartesian philosophy — so like each other after all — offer royal road for the wickedness of men. The curé affirms that animals think, not like men, certainly, but that they think well; that they enjoy, suffer, feel emotion, communicate, reciprocate, use a language. Indeed, this language is not constructed like ours, but, at least, with beasts, one does not find all the treachery, lies, perfidies, ruses and sleight of hand permitted by human language.

No need for long dissertations, the practiced eye of the peasant suffices. Laughing, the philosopher (Meslier) opposes the learned demonstrations in the service of Malebranche's false idea to the good sense of the peasant. What does the man of the fields, the man of the lower orders, the worker of the earth with his horses or cows, the farmer with his cows and his sheep, the cowherd, the swineherd, the shepherd — what do they say when the philosopher offers them Cartesian discourse on beasts? They laugh with a big and beautiful philosophic laughter!

The *Testament* continues: because wrong ideas on this subject exist, men give free rein to their bad passions. Hence those massacres of cats which transform vice, wickedness, perversion into a very popular spectacle much frequented at this epoch. These hysterical village fetes at which people throw into the blaze cats captured for this purpose degrading the humans who take part in it. "Detestable pleasures," "mad and detestable joy," he writes. If he had known Spinoza at first hand, Meslier would have diagnosed the "sad passions."

XV. Meslier, the Complete Philosopher

The philosophical establishment awards the degrees and certificates of conformity; it honors, first of all, the idealists, the

order to give ideological weapons to the temporal power supported by spiritual power, one can give no credit to this mythology.

Saint Jerome says it himself… Why do we have here the Apocrypha, there the synoptic gospels? Who decides? According to what criteria? For what reasons? What interests? Meslier replies and points to the determining role of the Synods, that of Carthage and that of Trent; he arranges these acts on his display tables: these are princes in vile league with the bishops, emperors supported by clergy, who make arbitrarily these decisions which form the law.

These books contain nothing sacred. On the contrary, the formidable number of rough estimates, of contradictions, of imperfections, of defects, of errors, are all witness to a human production, very human! Meslier sees acting in certain literary creations the same principle that animates folklore and fiction: "stories of fairies and our old novels," writes Meslier, proceeding from the same world… he recommends Aesop rather than Luke, Mark, or Matthew!

To those who argue of the power of allegory and challenge the atheist critical exegesis because of its supposed simplism, the curé replies in calling attention to allegory's hidden sense, second, extra-literal to theologians who insist upon the third, fourth, or nth degree taking up with great subterfuge: this bad faith appealing to that of the reader in soliciting his interpretative fantasy. This fraud, "anagogic and tropological" he lays up to Saint Paul, this "great trickster" careful to cover his errors and his guesses by this intellectual malice.

VIII. The Plums of Paradise

The supposedly holy scripture collects absurdities. Hence the miracles of the prophets. Meslier devotes a long time to cutting to pieces these ravings that contradict the laws of nature, which are the only rules recognized in a sound undertaking conducted by the

light of reason. Whatever happens manifests itself ineluctably according to the natural order. We cannot believe in the possibility of walking on water, of splitting the sea into two, resuscitating the dead, healing the incurable, multiplying fish, changing water into wine, and so on without exposing ourselves to ridicule.

If someone today claimed to accomplish this kind of miracle or to have been present at one of them, certainly he would be led away to join other madmen, for he would be mad. These extravagances are not to be read in an allegorical sense because they are presented as proof of divine supernatural powers.

Meslier puts into perspective the pagan texts and the holy texts, then shows that miracles abound in each category as in the other. Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is as valuable as either the gospel narrator or the apologetic books telling about the lives of saints, who, decapitated, keep walking on their road, immersed in a cauldron of boiling oil, continue to pray and preach calmly, dismembered or cooked on the grill, eviscerated down to the last intestine, keep sporting a smug smile of the insane, certain of their deeds.

To which he adds theological considerations: let us even admit the existence of miracles, what would we have to conclude about them? That this God who grants his favors in a random manner, saving one but rejecting another, granting his benevolence to the first but not to the second, this God must be of an unshakable cruelty! One who, (see above), contradicts even the definition of God which always emphasizes Justice. To become credible the miracle ought to work for everyone, always, all the time, which would define paradise on earth. And we are far from it. CQFD (Ce qu'il fallait demontrer, That which must be demonstrated — tr.), writes Spinoza.

The extravagances recorded in the Bible are no more worthy of credit than the miracles. Hence, to hold with *Genesis*, the primal paradise, the talking serpent, the story of the apple — or of the plum, writes Meslier — the tree of life, of knowledge, a first man

Treatise on Man. Animals are reduced to an assembly of wheels, pulleys, and springs. These things do not think, do not experience any sentiment, do not communicate, do not feel anything, are ignorant of language. From which arises the difference of radical nature between men and beasts.

The anecdote is perhaps false, but it makes a point: the famous Father Malebranche, orator, author, thus of famous theses on animal machines, is supposed to have kicked the rear end of a dog who was prancing in the presence of his visitor. Even though apocryphal, the story is telling: it says that a philosophical thesis justifies the bad treatments inflicted upon animals. It legitimizes above all the lack of remorse when animals are tortured or put to death.

For his part, Meslier undertakes to kick the philosophical backside of Malebranche. Because these Cartesians imagine that to think is above all, and above all to think that one thinks, to know that one thinks, these zoophobes conclude that animals do not think. But Meslier defines exactly that to think is to recognize the adjustment of flesh to modifications of matter. Men and beasts, in this sense, live by the same standard.

The enemies of materialism who are the disciples of Descartes cannot resolve the problem without the subterfuge of dualist sophism of thinking matter as distinct from matter at large. That is why the Cartesians are religiously devout and devout Christians: their two contradictory modes — of which one is fiction… — allow them to be partisans of the Catholic religion.

For Meslier, animals are indeed machines — just like men! Nothing distinguishes them, except for variations in arrangement of their matter. No thinking substance in man but a brain; the same as in a nightingale or a pig. Even if the grey matter differs, the essential remains: a being is reduced to the materiality of his physiology, the sow and the worshipper at the Oratory mingle. The lesson? Between men and beasts there exists no natural difference, only a difference of degree. This conclusion defines a materialist ontology, a first in French philosophy.

communist who devotes very beautiful lines to justifying tyrannicide under the form of a pure and simple slaughter of the King for keeping his subjects in slavery, this atheist curé who raves against the waves of blood poured in the course of too numerous religious ceremonies of immolation of beasts, this radical atheist ideologist who deplores just as much the blood bespattering the cross on Golgotha, this volcanic philosopher cannot endure watching someone eating a chicken. His morality of pity generates a pitiless ethic: no pity for people without pity. Is he wrong to think this way?

XIII. Kicking the Backsides of (Nicholas) Malebranche

Meslier defends nature, all Nature. He challenges hierarchical thought and, today, would be sensitive to the arguments of antispeciesists who fight a pyramidical organization of nature with man at the summit and the animals at the base, with the former having the liberty to inflict on the latter all sorts of inhuman acts: to exploit, to torture, to martyr, to kill, to enslave, to enchain, to beat down, to devour.

This position, dominant in our society for two thousand years, proceeds from the Judeo-Christian incitement in *Genesis:* soulless animals, unscathed by original sin, without possibility of survival, these creatures placed under human rule, below man, above the vegetable, then the mineral, these creatures exist for the welfare of humans. Humans can use them as they choose to obtain force for work, gentleness for company, flesh to consume, skin for clothing, currency for sacrifice for holocausts. Meslier, again, vituperates Christianity.

Among his enemies are the Cartesian philosophers — whom he well perceives as "the devoutly religious." A favorite target is Malebranche, who devotes long pages in *Research of Truth* to reviving, pursuing, and developing the theses produced by Descartes in his

and a first woman, an original sin, its transmission to all the descendants of Adam and Eve. Fable, fable, fable . . .

IX. A Sick Person named Jesus

Jean Meslier does not doubt the historical existence of Jesus. For that, it is necessary to wait for Bruno Bauer (1809-82), a Hegelian of the Left and his *Critique of the Synoptic Gospels* (1841). But he does reduce Jesus to a human condition, and of the shabbiest: this *archfanatic*, he writes, is equally *mad, out of his mind, miserably fanatic, unhappy rogue, a man of the abyss, vile and despicable,* a person with adventures more extravagant than those of Don Quixote!

His thoughts are unsettled. This man pretends to come on earth to redeem through his death the sins of the world, but, on one hand, he shows himself incapable of saving himself from the agony of the cross; on the other hand, since his death we have not seen either evil or the planet's negativity, diminish, as announced. Moreover, all his prophecies are vain and have never been fulfilled: they prove the mental disorder of a man not of a son of God!

So many pronouncements placing Jesus on the side of the malicious and the wicked. Because to deceive men about their fate, to lead them into error about things as essential as the conduct of their existence and their fate after death, these are culpable lies and merit the gallows. The method amounts to metaphysical fraud.

His mode of life equally bears witness against him: why did he, this raving person, have to run everywhere, to come and to go through all the areas of Judea in order to evangelize and try to convert to his fables the greatest number of people? And then to say that the Devil led him to a mountain peak in order to tempt him? Is he serious? Would all this be proposed by a man equipped with all his mental faculties?

Note even his miracles. When he supposedly accomplishes these fairy tales, we have to see, writes Meslier, what kind of guru he pre-

tends to be! The fragile psychology of this man evidently matches that of his disciples, who are also of a debilitated mental constitution. His deeds form an incredible tissue of lies.

This person has no real consistency. His disposition is dreamlike. All we need is to pay attention to the *Gospels* carefully. Contradictions abound. Historical truth does not exist. The witnesses disagree in every sense. Examples: the genealogy of Jesus differs from one evangelist to another; the facts and the gestures, the anecdotes of the infant Jesus do not coincide; the length of time of the duration of his public life varies; there are even differences among his acts after baptism; and on the details of his first retreat; equally on the inconsistencies in the time and manner in which the individual apostles follow him; on that which really happens during the Last Supper; on the women having followed him since Galilee; on the number, the place, the circumstances of his apparitions after his death; likewise about his ascension into heaven; and these among many other examples . . .

X. Paste and Flour Idols

To begin with, the Church is a vile and pernicious sect. Historians of the epoch confirm it. Its dogmas are loaded with records of extravagance: the Holy Trinity, for example. How can three people make one when the Father engenders the Son, hence ought to precede him, without speaking of the Holy Ghost… This belief, Meslier writes, denotes real paganism!

Same comment about the supposed mystery of the Eucharist. The Middle Ages abounds with texts of philosophers and theologians giving long and laborious dissertations on the status of the host. With the help of casuistry, one asks oneself what would become of it if, for example, a rat came along to chew it up alas, or if, dropped into a ditch — by a priest staggering to give extreme unction… does it still remain the body of Christ?

The curé combats servitude in all forms. Consistent with his materialism, he poses the problem of animals as a philosopher for whom there exists only one world with multiple variations. The material unity of being prevents him from thinking in terms of hierarchy, and the submission and servitude that come with hierarchy. This reading of immanence does not oppose, as does Christian thought, dualism to transcendence, two universes, men and women, humans and animals, adults and children, males and females — offering one positively over the other.

Meslier cannot bear figures of evil. His metaphysical position seems to proceed less from a rational and reasonable demonstration than from a radical instinct, from a visceral response to the spectacle of injustice and iniquity. In the manner of Montaigne who speaks in the first person and thinks universally, taking off from autobiographical anecdotes, Meslier discloses that he can not endure butchers and butcheries. The life of blood makes him unconfortable. And, when it is necessary to kill chickens, pigeons, or pigs to eat, he feels a genuine aversion, a real repugnance.

If he should assent to vegetarianism, it would not be as a result of intellectual deductions, but from this very incapacity to endure the spectacle of grief and the suffering of animals — springing from his feeling for all living beings. The systematic refusal to eat meat, though, seems to him a superstitious choice, recalling religious bigotry, the other side of the coin where one finds the lust of religions for animal holocausts to win favor from the gods.

With equal fervor, Meslier fights against this barbaric custom of immolation of innocent victims. How could God, if he exists, consent to so much gratuitous destruction of these specimens of perfection of his creation? What a nonsensical idea to believe that God likes gestures similar to madness.? What would be the sense in it? And why would so much blood outpoured persuade him to satisfy human prayer?

This man who rejoices in recalling a peasant's desire to strangle the bourgeois with the intestines of priests, this revolutionary

here and now, legitimizes the law of the jungle. The text of *Beatitudes* plays a conservative, counter- revolutionary role; it endorses the status quo and gives its blessing to general injustice.

XII. An Ethic of Pity

Meslier defends the humble, the humiliated, those without status, modest people, the victims. Not astonishing that we find from his pen a defense, unpublished in the history of ideas before him, of women, children and animals, these three groups of exploited humanity upon whom violence, and wickedness, are primarily concentrated along with brutality of husband at his wife, parents at children, masters at animals. We could start with a view of these three victims of servitude. Let us not forget, first of all, that these pages date during the first years of the 18th century, and humanity is subject to the exclusive white formula — European, male, Christian, adult. If Meslier writes nothing about people of color — just a few lines in passing in the relativist spirit of a (Francois de) La Mothe Le Vayer — nothing about people outside Europe, he still devotes significant sentences to beaten, abandoned children, to neglected and unhappy women in bad marriages, and then long convincing pages fighting against the Cartesian theses of animals as machines in favor of a real humanity of animals. At his epoch the combat does not exist.

The Christian position on the indissolubility of marriage causes ravages in families: the impossibility of leaving an aggressive, violent, evil spouse transforms life into a nightmare. When parents separate, the children — though rescued by in-laws, grandfathers and grandmothers, surrogates or tutors, are not provided with a better education. Their experience and the bad examples transform these individuals into asocial adults. Meslier hopes for communal education supported by public funds in order to contribute to children's education, which promotes public welfare.

Theology has many unsmiling dissertations on these subjects — all resolved by a sentence of the curé which defines the host as "an idol of paste and flour" using the same title as pagan idols of iron, wood, stone, gold, or silver adored by the most backward people of ancient times. Folly! Jesus never asked to be worshiped in this bakery form. In no part of the *Gospels* can this stupid superstition be proven or deduced.

The Eucharist, a Christian mystery, needs Aristotle's thought to establish its philosophic legitimacy. Scholasticism, with its categories of substance, accidents, genera, substantial forms, is the sole authorization of this ontological three card monte which permits affirmation of the bread really, not symbolically — " literally" and not "figuratively,' for, to speak like Thomas Aquinas, the body of a man dead two thousand years ago is identical with the wine originating in French vineyards, real blood of the same man.

One understands why the Church has always condemned so strongly materialist thought since for it this story of substance and of its accidents counts for zero, because in its eyes everything in the world, including the hosts or the chalice wine, is reduced to an atomic arrangement purely and simply. A disciple of Epicurus cannot decently believe in the nonsense of transubstantiation.

We are not surprised that Meslier defends as well, in proper logic, an extremely coherent materialist theory, which it might be said in passing, is formulated independently of Epicurus, without recourse to his atoms, particles, to the void, to the *clinamen* (deviation or swerve — tr.) and to the whole Epicurean arsenal, an original, modern materialist theory shamelessly appropriated by La Mettrie, (Adrien) Helvétius, (Baron Paul-Henri de) Holbach, (Marquis Donatien de) Sade.

XI. For a Post-Christian Morality

Thus Meslier undermines Christianity in its foundation, its reasons, its rationale, its logic, its rhetoric, its beliefs, its myths, its fables: God does not exist; the sacred texts, products of forgers, convey fables; Christianity is a factory of absurd fictions involving paradise, hell, original sin, etc.; Jesus is not the Son of God, but a miserable madman, human, very human; the dogmas and mysteries of the Holy Trinity type or the sacrament like the Eucharist proceed from the idolatrous belief of pagans. But Meslier attacks, as well, the theory of Christian morality, which he finds perfidious, bad, against nature and unfounded.

After the destruction of the logical fantasies of Heaven, he attacks the pernicious practices of the Catholic world on earth. The deconstruction of theology expands into a deconstruction of ethics. The Christian ethic is degraded because it is pegged on the compulsion of death, it loves and cherishes misery, it devotes a cult of suffering in the insistent logic of the imitation of the Passion of Christ. How can anyone defend a position like that?

Why condemn desires? These are natural affections of the flesh — "the gentle inclination of Nature." Let us remain in the Christian logic: if desires exist it is indeed because God placed them into the body of men. How could he endow humans with desire and ask them to detest it? Let us leave this logic: God does not exist, only nature has put these affections into human flesh. She has her good reasons — reproduction of the species, continuation of humanity.

The sexual morality defended by the Church prevents sexuality outside marriage; and it codifies very severely the sexuality of a married couple. Meslier finds nothing to criticize in the free usage of one's body, including partners not united in holy sacrament. The hedonist contract suffices to legitimize the sexual act: a desire shared for a time and agreed to by both parties. Too many badly married women suffer; too many children submit under the hard law of married parents who hate each other but who remain together because the Church forces them to and threatens them with Hell if they divorce. Meslier defends a common law marriage, understood as apt for priests, monks, and brothers — and divorce for a relationship without sexual and sensual fulfillment.

No question however of a license for the body or for celebrating debauchery. Meslier understands pleasure as a simple thing, natural, not complicated. Excess does not suit him. No prude, but also no defender of seignoral libertinage of the powerful ones of the moment, the curé proposes a flesh without guilt, playing naturally with the potentialities of permitted joy here and now.

Nature commands: one cannot desire what goes against it. Austerity endangers it. If by chance one practiced continence or chastity, if one forbade oneself all sexuality, then the world will go toward its ruin and its end. The Christian commandments are unfounded and ridiculous. The model for sexuality is none the less not the animal, as it is for cynics. For Meslier, thinking of baroque libertines, when it comes to sexuality, one must submit to the laws and customs of one's country: thus one will not agree to incest or other endogamic sexualities. On alternative modalities of sexuality, homosexuality for example, Meslier keeps silent.

The atheist curé follows through with his criticism of Christian morality: it is wrong with regard to grief; it is wrong in matters of sexual morality; it is equally indefensible in its eulogy of love for one's fellow men. This dangerous invitation supposes that men and women ought to endure wickedness without flinching . Not to respond to blows, to offer the other cheek, to love one's enemies, there is that which justifies the perverse order of the world. With similar logic, one can give free rein to feudal brutality, exploitation of the weak, and assure impunity for those beasts of prey who are louts and lords, parasites of the system, and other tyrants of the monarchy.

To bless those who curse us, to pardon those who injure us daily under the pretext that one day in the next world justice will be rendered one very hypothetical last day of judgment — this is what,