

THOMAS CARLYLE  
 THE AGE OF MACHINERY  
 (1829)

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) was Britain's foremost cultural critic during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, especially for American readers. The Transcendentalists were particularly impressed by his journalistic accounts of German literature and thought, which helped make German philosophy seem accessible and directed them to the significance of Goethe. Emerson sought Carlyle out during his 1833 visit to England after resigning his pastorate and struck up a life-long—though at times strained—friendship with this fellow lapsed-Protestant iconoclast. Later they became each other's literary agent in their home countries.

Carlyle was also the first prominent Anglo-American critic to diagnose the wrenching change ushered in by the industrial revolution. The combination of wonder and severity with which he viewed its disruption of traditional social arrangements struck a responsive chord throughout the English-speaking world. The social reform thrust within Transcendentalism had a distinctly Carlylean ring. Orestes Brownson, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau, and others all wrote about the mechanization of labor and exploitation of the working man with Carlyle's charges at least partially in mind. Both the substance and the sarcasm of Thoreau's assertion, in *Walden*, that "men have become the tools of their tools" goes right back to Carlyle—on whom Thoreau had earlier written an appreciative essay. When Carlyle's jeremiads later turned reactionary, siding, for example, with masters against slaves, even his forbearing friend Emerson objected.

But his early discouragement left a permanent mark.

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SOURCE: "Significance of the Industrial Revolution"

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But his early discourses on the consequences of industrialization left a permanent mark.

In this particular reading, Carlyle's satire is directed not so much at concerns about economic or material conditions as more abstractly—or profoundly—at the mechanization of thought and social activity that industrialization seemed to portend: the displacement of individual initiative by corporatism and of individual creativity by the efficiency ethic. The emerging Transcendentalist movement would have been additionally gratified by the link Carlyle draws between the age of machinery and the “mechanical” philosophy of Locke.

SOURCE: “Signs of the Times,” *Edinburgh Review*, 49 (June 1829).

Were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches, and practices the greater art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. For the simplest operation, some helps and accompaniments, some cunning, abbreviating process is in readiness. Our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster. The sailor furls his sail, and lays down his oar, and bids a strong, unwearied servant, on vaporous wings, bear him through the waters. Men have crossed oceans by steam; the Birmingham Fire-king has visited the fabulous East; and the genius of the Cape, were there any Camoens now to sing it, has again been alarmed, and with far stranger thunders than Gama's. There is no end to machinery. Even the horse is stripped of his harness, and finds a fleet fire-horse yoked in his stead. Nay, we have an artist that hatches chickens by steam—the very brood-hen is to be superseded! For all earthly, and for some unearthly purposes, we have machines and mechanic furtherances; for mincing our cabbages; for casting us into magnetic sleep. We remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with rude nature; and, by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils.

What wonderful accessions have thus been made, and are making, to the physical power of mankind; how much better clothed, lodged, and, in all outward respects, accommodated, men are, or might be, by a given quantity of labour, is a grateful reflection which forces itself on every one. What changes, too, this addition of power is introducing into the social system; how wealth has more and more increased, and at the same time gathered itself more and more into masses, strangely altering the old relations, and increasing the distance between the rich and the poor, will be a question for Political Economists—and a much more complex and important one than any they have yet engaged with. But leaving these matters for the present, let us observe how the mechanical genius of our time has diffused itself into quite other provinces. Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. Here, too, nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old, natural methods. Every thing has its cunningly devised implements, its pre-established apparatus; it is not done by hand, but by machinery. Thus we have machines for Education: Lancasterian machines; Hamiltonian machines—Monitors, maps, and emblems. Instruction, that mysterious communing of Wisdom with Ignorance, is no longer an indefinable tentative process, requiring a study of individual aptitudes, and a perpetual variation of means and methods, to attain the same end; but a secure, universal, straightforward business, to be conducted in the gross, by proper mechanism, with such intellect as comes to hand. Then, we have Religious machines, of all imaginable varieties—the Bible Society, professing a far higher and heavenly structure, is found, on enquiry, to be altogether an earthly contrivance, supported by collection of monies, by fomenting of vanities, by puffing, intrigue, and chicanery—and yet, in effect, a very excellent machine for converting the heathen. It is the same in all other departments. Has any man, or any society of men, a truth to speak, a piece of spiritual work to do, they can no-wise proceed at once, and with the mere natural organs, but must first call a public meeting, appoint committees, issue prospectuses, eat a public dinner; in a word, construct or borrow machinery, wherewith to speak it and do it.

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From Locke's time downwards, our whole Metaphysics have been physical; not a spiritual Philosophy, but a material one. The singular estimation in which his Essay was so long held as a scientific work, (for

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the character of the man entitled all he said to veneration,) will one day be thought a curious indication of the spirit of these times. His whole doctrine is mechanical, in its aim and origin, in its method and its results. It is a mere discussion concerning the origin of our consciousness, or ideas, or whatever else they are called; a genetic history of what we see *in* the mind. But the grand secrets of Necessity and Free-will, of the mind's vital or non-vital dependence on matter, of our mysterious relations to Time and Space, to God, to the universe, are not, in the faintest degree, touched on in their enquiries; and seem not to have the smallest connexion with them.