

# THE WORSHIP OF THE MACHINE

BY LOUIS UNTERMAYER

I KNOW no more deplorable programme than the current effort to "humanize" the machine. There is, for the appreciative ironist, a sardonic humor in the attempt; as man becomes more and more systematized, less of a temperament, the factory grows more and more temperamental. The robot, dissatisfied with mere robot efficiency, desires a soul; and the protagonists of the machine, quick to oblige their creature, take away the one thing which distinguishes man from his toy-creations. There is, as I said, something humorous about the transference. The surrender to industrialism—in itself a too-early confession of the defeat of the individual—implies the subservience of man not only to things, but to things he has made without love, uses without thought, and destroys without compunction.

There is, it seems to me, only one further extension of the irony, and that step is being taken—tentatively, it is true—but with a fantastic inevitability. It is this: The machine (so say its proclaimers) is now part of our lives; we are governed by new rhythms, hitherto undreamed-of speeds, angular and incisive patterns. We rise at the metallic summons of the machine, are propelled to our labors by it, are clothed and comforted by its dispensation, live every hour by its powerful and beneficent variety. Since we cannot escape it, let us accept it. And since we must accept it, let us do it, not with futile

regrets, but whole-heartedly. Let us, first, understand it. Then—as happens with all the intimate connections of our lives—we can transmute the machine into loveliness, sublimate it through art, employ it in beauty.

Such, in short, is the argument. It is, even on the surface, as fallacious as it is familiar—a pathetic fallacy in the actual as well as the technical sense. To begin with, man is actually no more responsive to the machine than he has ever been. Paraphrasing Whistler, I might say there has never been a machine-conscious people, there has never been a Machine Age. Or, rather, there has always been one. The invention of the wheel by some Neolithic Henry Ford was completely revolutionary—the double entendre is unavoidable—but I doubt if it affected the soul of man any more than the perfection of the engine by Herr Diesel. The chariot speeded-up Egyptian blood no less than the Californian; but not one of all the obelisks, stelæ or papyri mention the profound change in motor power which affected the citizens of Thebes and Karnak.

It is not difficult to guess the reason why the Greeks composed no odes to the loom, why the Latins celebrated the wine but not the wine-press, why the Hebrews sang psalms to the Temple but none to the cranes and pulleys that erected it. The reason is the inherent distrust which man has for his engines of power. It is a distrust which springs from a dislike for the

mechanisms he employs and which he feels, with instinctive certainty, employ him. Only a few self-indulged and self-deceived painters and poets, only a theory-ridden musician who has mistaken his medium, can believe that man *en masse* has ever loved or identified himself with the machine he serves.

## II

Before I could afford the luxury of a life of letters, I worked in a factory that employed some two hundred men. For almost twenty years it was part of my task to design the jewelry and superintend the machines that manufactured it. I mention this only to indicate the degrees of interest aroused in the men as well as myself. The employes were curious about the individual shapes which the lockets, link-buttons and lavallieres assumed; they were not the least concerned with the sometimes massive, sometimes delicate mechanisms used to produce the articles in quantity. There was a machinist whose duty it was to look after the lathes, the drop-presses and the human-fingered chain-mesh machines; but when I, in my ignorant and enthusiastic twenties, tried to draw him into conversation about their mysteries, I found his regard for them was wholly in proportion to how easily they got out of order.

The men are too used to them, I thought, with an apologetic obeisance to the machine; they have lived with these marvels so long that they think no more of them than of their other ordinary associations. Then the war came and the factory was patriotically if only partly transformed to turn out 'plane-parts, contact-points and surgical instruments. But the introduction of unfamiliar machinery made no impression on the men. After a

casual inspection of the superintelligent automatic monsters, the foreman went back to the making of his own Pilsner and his assistants told me at length about their little war-gardens on the outskirts of Newark. The only one who wanted to talk about the dexterous screw-machines was myself, an unripe poet.

It is the unripe poets—whether their medium happens to be words, pigments or semi-quavers—who have devoted themselves to the cult of the machine. That they fail is obvious. The quality of their failure is less apparent, but it is the more significant. Even they, with a predetermined affection for the “new, unpassioned beauty” of the great machines cannot love them for what they are. The only way they can identify themselves with derricks and grain-elevators is by “humanizing” them. Thus the force of dynamos becomes the *élan vital*, the thrusting piston-rods project the male principle, magnetos are translated into breasts supplying the quickening juice, the steam-shovel is a romantic being, half-dragon, half-dinosaur, with a wise and wicked brain.

These, I repeat, are pathetic fallacies—fallacies which, though, presumably “modern,” are no less absurd than those *clichés* of the Eighteen Eighties which made the rough-shod Wind seduce the bashful Rose, the Sunset give birth to the Opal, and the Moon hold intimate converse with the Water-Lily. The impulse is the same; the machine is not only being humanized, it is being prettified. To recognize this, one has only to compare the boiler-shop with the petty and grotesque batteries that pretend to imitate it in the concert-hall; the soaring problem of skyscrapers with the arbitrary “arrangements” that stylize them on canvas; the circling of a Corliss engine-wheel with the neat epithets that try to hold it. It is,

or so it seems to a captious craftsman, no sillier to speak of "Morning's shy kiss laid on the blushing hills" than to compare the valves of a worn-out Buick to "the valves of the suffering heart" or to call riveters "the wood-peckers of the town." Both are the results of cliché-thinking and both are specious. That they are both sentimental scarcely needs to be added.

### III

That the machine has always resisted man's attempt to exploit it "artistically" must be clear to anyone whose history embraces more than contemporaneity. Every first-rate artist has realized this. When Da Vinci drew his types of destructive machines, his purpose was utilitarian. He never fell in love with them; he never questioned but that their end was antipathetic to the spirit as well as the body of man.

Before me lies a curious illustration of my text. It is a sonnet by a poet who determined to glorify the advent of the New Age. It begins bravely enough:

What nudity is beautiful as this  
Obedient monster purring at its toil;  
These naked iron muscles sweating oil,  
And the sure-fingered rods that never miss.

But by the time the sestet was reached, something had gone wrong with the poet. He had lost control of his idea, or, rather, another idea had ejected the original one. He had not completed his traditional eighth line before he saw the danger to

the worshipper of the machine, and the apostrophe to the machine concluded thus:

It does not vent its loathing; does not turn  
Upon its maker with eruptive hate.  
It has a deeper cunning; lives to earn  
Its master's bread, and laughs to see this  
                  great  
Lord of the earth, who rules but cannot  
                  learn,  
Become the slave of what his slaves create.

Here, too, even in revolt, the tone is wrong. Like everything connected with machine-worship, it is high-pitched, sentimental, "literary." But its twisted direction is amusing and the point is definite. The deification of a motor agency under the misconception that it is "modern" is as childish as the confusion of the dynamic spark with a dynamo. The machine has no independent life; it possesses no animating principle, for it is, in spite of its induced motions, inanimate.

The cult of the machine is merely a poor substitute for a lost faith in what made the machine possible. But the machine has none of the appurtenances of a god. It lacks those twin attributes of godhood: authority and inscrutability. Its miracles can be predetermined and compelled. Only to a primitive or unripe mind has it a creative power of its own. And it is this which makes the mechanistic idolatry both pitiful and comic. In the absence of God man must make gods. And the longer he lives with them the poorer he makes them.

## EDITORIALS

### *Statecraft as a Practical Art*

Everyone seems to agree that the English have a great talent for government, but no one seems to notice that England itself is one of the worst governed states of modern times. The English, in time of peace, pay appalling taxes to no purpose, and in time of war they pour out their blood to the same witless end. The country offers rich pasturage for a small gang of knavish money-grabbers and professional politicians, but what the average Englishman gets out of it is hard to discern. If he is of the hard-working, well-meaning, useful middle class he is barely able to make a decent living; if he is of the working class he is always on the verge of starvation. All of the money seems to go to a few men, none of them of any visible value to the state. They and their women waste it, and that is the end of it. Every gambling-house in Europe is crowded with Englishmen, and it is they, and not Americans, who support such playgrounds as the Engadine, Egypt and the Riviera. London is full of expensive restaurants, night-clubs, and other such arenas of conspicuous waste. But the average Englishman is lucky if he is able to dine upon a cut from a greasy joint and two soggy vegetables.

This gross and crying unfairness in the distribution of the national wealth has been going on for two centuries. Every politician in practise during that time has made loud promises to remedy it, but not one of them has ever succeeded. In that field, indeed, such radicals as Ramsay MacDonald have failed even more miserably than such

defenders of the existing order as Chamberlain and Disraeli. One and all, they have come croppers at the principal aim and purpose of their trade, which is to secure the safety, prosperity and happiness of the people. The English would probably be better off today, taking one with another, if, for a hundred years past, they had had no government at all. They are an orderly and industrious people, and carry themselves very decently when left to their own devices. All that their so-called government has achieved for them is to make them poor and to expose them to serious risks of disaster. The realm is plainly wobbling today, and despite the natural advantages which have saved it so often in the past, it may go down to wreck and ruin tomorrow. No sensible insurance man would care to write a policy on the English state.

I have said that it is one of the worst governed countries of modern times. This is only too obvious, but it does not follow that the other great nations are substantially better off. All of them are run extravagantly and idiotically, and by men who appear to be as lacking in good sense as they are in common honesty. In none of them is the government in the hands of the superior minority of the people. Here I do not confuse superiority with social dignity, nor even with education. I mean simply superiority in the common talents and virtues, universally recognized as such—superiority in intelligence, in tastes and habits of mind, in disinterested patriotism, in honor. Everywhere one sees governments operated by men wholly lacking in