

Dynamic Force or Mechanic Energy? :

A Study of "Power" in Thomas Carlyle's Theory of Hero-Worship

Yoshinari YAMAGUCHI

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Synopsis

In his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), Thomas Carlyle repeatedly denounced the mechanically oriented conditions of contemporary British society, which he believed were aptly symbolized by a mechanical artifact, the steam engine. Apparently, steam power was anathema to him, while he tried to introduce another source of power to the world, that is, heavenly "Force" and its dynamic agents, heroes. Carlyle's theory of hero-worship was set upon a basic binary opposition between mechanical steam power and spiritual "Force." When we read his writings closely, however, we cannot help wondering whether these two can be clearly distinguished in his thought. For, we can see a figure of steam engine persistently looming up in his texts. My purpose in this essay is then to examine Carlyle's theory of hero-worship with special emphasis upon his probably unwitting use of technological or industrial metaphors, and to show how his imagination was influenced, if not generated, by industrialization and technological development in 19th-century British society.

Keywords

Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Steam Power, Industrialization, Technological Development, Mechanical Imagination

Academic Appointment & Degree

Lecturer, Department of Cultural Studies at Kochi Women's University, since April 2003 (Master of Arts)

Some time after Matthew Boulton had withdrawn from the ormolu manufacture in order to venture forth into another business in partnership with James Watt, he was asked by his former customer, George III., what kind of enterprise he was now addressing to. " 'I am engaged, your Majesty, in the production of a commodity which is the desire of kings.' 'And what is that? what is that?' asked the King. 'POWER, your Majesty,' replied Boulton...."⁽¹⁾ Needless to say, this "POWER" was steam power, which had come to be available by Watt's invention of the steam engine (patented 1769).

Several decades later, there was a man who also desired a sort of power to preside over and give order to contemporary British society. His name is Thomas Carlyle. In his case, power was entirely spiritual "Force" of the universe,⁽²⁾ and it was supposed to be incarnated by God-inspired men, heroes. Heroes' rule over society or people's hero-worship was the only antidote for the paralyzed state of the contemporary world. The world could be saved, only when it was infused with "Force" and then activated through heroes' presence.

Apparently, this juxtaposition of steam power with Carlyle's heroes looks weird and almost impossible; they seem to belong to different galaxies. Or rather, according to Carlyle's theory, they are totally antagonistic to each other: the one is mere mechanic pseudo-power, and the other represents a dynamic agent of "Force." When we read his writings closely, however, we cannot help wondering whether these two can be clearly distinguished in his thought. For, we can see a figure of steam engine repeatedly looming up in his text, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841).⁽³⁾ Thus my purpose in this essay is to examine Carlyle's theory of hero-worship with special emphasis upon his, probably, unwitting use of technological or industrial metaphors. For this purpose, I will follow these three steps: 1) illustrating Carlyle's use of those metaphors in the text, 2) investigating his direct contacts with technological artifacts and immediate responses to them, and 3) thereby deducing his positionality in the contemporary discourse on mechanism, and presenting a possible import of his hero-worship.

I. Hero as Flame, People as Fuel

Probably, when we read Carlyle's texts, we first experience utmost despair of comprehending him. He is too confusing, and even seems to be a bit confused. My first step is concerned with a part of this complexity of his theory. His ideal model of spiritually inspired society is utterly complicated, so that it looks not so different from its antipode: that is, mechanically systemized society.

At a glance, Carlyle declares his strong opposition to the mechanized conditions of society. In his "Signs of the Times" (1829), he calls the times as "the Age of Machinery" (*CW*, 465) and then goes on to illustrate how the onrush of mechanization (de)forms society and human activities such as education, religion, politics and so on. This is not a true state of society for him, and he instead advocates a spiritual power as a foremost dynamic agent of it. Hence the following dichotomy in his discussion:

Carlyle's dichotomy

<u>Dynamics</u>	<u>Mechanics</u>
Metaphysical	Physical
Idealistic	Empirical
Deductive	Inductive
Intuition	Cause-and-effect argument
Religion	Science
Spiritual	Material

To be brief, "mechanics" is another name for materialism or utilitarianism. The chief effect of mechanics is, to use Carlyle's term, "enchantment" of people: deprivation of human vital and intuitional power.⁽⁴⁾ If we interpose his proposition of hero-worship upon this mechanics-dynamics dichotomy, then we might easily recapitulate his point: the contemporary mechanized society has to recover its own vital power, and this can be possible through the dynamic and spiritual agency of heroes or great men. To close inspection, however, the matter is not so simple.

First of all, it is logically evident that Carlyle assumes society is clearly to be divided between great men and common men, in accordance with the hierarchical binary opposition between dynamics and mechanics. This is a necessary consequence of his theory in a sense, because he proposes people's "worship" of heroes. If we are concerned with Carlyle's class consciousness, therefore, it may be quite interesting to discuss how he intends to set up a kind of intellectual aristocracy throughout his theory. Yet, to the purpose of the present essay, the crucial point lies in what kind of hierarchy is assumed between great men and common men, or after what model Carlyle's hero-worship is formulated.

Then let us examine *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* in detail. In this book, Carlyle repeatedly formulates the relationship between heroes and people as that between "flame" and "dry dead fuel," which implies that great men's spiritual power enlightens and activates paralytic common men, just as flame sets dead fuel on fire. "I liken common languid Times, with their unbelief, distress, perplexity, with their languid doubting characters and embarrassed circumstances, impotently crumbling-down into ever worse distress towards final ruin; —all this I liken to dry dead fuel, waiting for the lighting out of Heaven that shall kindle it. The great man, with his free force direct out of God's own hand, is the lightning.... There is no sadder symptom of a generation than such general blindness to the spiritual lightning, with faith only in the heap of barren dead fuel" (*H*, 13). The same analogy appears in his lectures on hero, at least, twelve times, though heroes' "spiritual lightning" is sometimes put in other words, such as "fire," "flame," "furnace," "spark," "radiance" and so on.⁽⁵⁾ Hence a model of society mobilized by fuel and flame. It is difficult to ignore some industrial and technological image metaphorically playing here. I even wonder if Carlyle shapes the entire hero-worship after a technological icon, the steam engine, whether consciously or unconsciously. I cannot help but

think so all the more for the fact that the steam engine had been formerly called "the fire engine."⁶

Carlyle may never admit it, because he most explicitly declares an anathema on the very steam engine in his lectures. "What a modern talks-of by the names, Forces of Nature, Laws of Nature; and does not figure as a divine thing; not even as one thing at all, but as a set of things, undivine enough,—saleable, curious, good for propelling steam-ships!" (*H*, 69); "... it is false altogether, what the last Sceptical Century taught us, that this world is a steam-engine" (*H*, 198-99). For Carlyle, the steam engine is indeed an embodiment or primal metaphor of what he calls "mechanics," a most pernicious evil in the contemporary world. In spite of it, however, the steam engine still haunts his discussion in an ambivalent way.

The most problematic moment comes when Carlyle explains an etymological root of a mythic divinity's name, "Odin." According to him, the name originally meant "force of *Movement*," and then he interrogates rhetorically, "what hinders it from being the name of a Heroic Man and Mover, as well as of a god?" (*H*, 24) It is at this moment that the steam engine slips into his argument: "some very green thing, chiefly notable for its greenness, got the appellative name *Green*, and then the next thing remarkable for that quality, a tree for instance, was named the *green* tree, —as we still say 'the *steam* coach,' 'four-horse coach,' or the like" (italics Carlyle's; *H*, 24). What he tries to demonstrate in his usual confusing manner is that the proper noun of a divinity is naturally fit for an adjective of hero, but for that purpose, he uses an example of the term "steam." For the sake of clarification, the following chart may be useful.

Creations of (Proper) Adjectives

"Odin" (force of Movement)	—————	applied as an adjective to a hero
The original object "Green"	—————	applied to a "green" tree
The original "Steam"	—————	applied to a "steam" coach

What should we do with this? Is it possible to explain away, saying that it is a mere coincident? I don't think so. We should not judge Carlyle's attitude toward the steam engine and so-called "mechanics" hastily, just from his overt assertion of abhorrence for them. Paradoxically, he may be influenced by the steam engine, especially its power, too.

To elucidate his ambivalent attitude toward steam power, it is also necessary to investigate Carlyle's more immediate responses to it. Fortunately, he left a bunch of letters behind him, so we can find some clue there.

II. Carlyle's Technological Sublime

Examining Carlyle's biographical information, we can find quite a few incidents in his life really interesting to our purpose. In the autumn of 1839, for example, he got on the railroad train for the first time, and this episode provides an example of his immediate responses to

steam power. In his letter to John Sterling, 29 September 1839,⁽⁷⁾ he describes his first experience of the steam-engine train, referring to it as "the huge Steam mystery" and "an enormous diabolic fire-dragon" running "in the most unintelligible yet unerring way." Indeed his abhorrence of the locomotive may be easily inferred from this kind of phraseology. When we read on into the next paragraph, however, we come across a similar yet confounding allusion to "fire." In this instance, he changes topics to Sterling's article which had been just published then, and praises it like this: "It is a thing all glowing and boiling, like a furnace of molten metal." Especially when reverberation of the "diabolic fire-dragon" is still felt, we cannot help wondering again, whether these metaphors of "fire" are distinguished clearly in Carlyle's thinking. The one is "diabolic," the other "glowing," but both are the same fire. Taken together with his repeated indication of the hero's "flame" or "light" in his theory on hero, the question is as follows: does Carlyle distinguish hero's enlightening flame from the steam-engine's fire?

Carlyle's trips to Birmingham in 1821 and 1824 are also suggestive of his ambiguous attitude toward the "fire" produced by machines. According to Fred Kaplan, seeing the fiery spectacle of Birmingham, Carlyle's "imagination was preoccupied both with the wealth that industrial activity produced... and the sheer visual excitement of constant explosion of heat and fire."⁽⁸⁾ The following passage is an extract from Carlyle's letter to his brother, Alexander Carlyle, dated 11 August 1824. Though this is so long a passage, yet it is worth our while quoting entirely:

I was one day thro the iron and coal works of this neighborhood— a half-frightful scene! A space perhaps 30 square miles to the north of us, covered over with furnaces, rolling-mills, steam-engines and sooty men. A dense cloud of pestilential smoke hangs over it forever, blackening even the grain that grows upon it; and at night the whole region burns like a volcano spitting fire from a thousand tubes of brick. But oh the wretched hundred and fifty thousand mortals that grind out their destiny there! In the coal-mines they were literally naked, many of them, all but trowsers: black as ravens; plashing about among dripping caverns, or scrambling amid heaps of broken mineral; and thirsting unquenchably for beer. In the iron-mills it was little better: blast-furnaces were roaring like the voice of many whirlwinds all around; the fiery metal was hissing thro' its moulds, or sparkling and spitting under hammers of a monstrous size, which fell like so many little earthquakes. Here they were wheeling charred coal, breaking their iron-stone, and tumbling all into their fiery pit; there they were turning and boring cannon with a hideous shrieking noise such as the earth could hardly parallel; thro' the whole, half-naked demons pouring with sweat and besmeared with soot were hurrying to and fro in their red night-caps and sheet-iron breeches rolling or hammering or squeezing their glowing metal as if it had been wax or dough. They also have a thirst for ale.⁽⁹⁾

Apparently, this is another evidence of Carlyle's detestation for industrial machines, and here we

can find the unmistakable sign of his sympathy with "the wretched hundred and fifty thousand mortals." And yet, this passage also creates a certain atmosphere by contrasting blinding light and thick darkness: a dense cloud of "blackening" smoke, the surrounding night, and laborers "black as ravens" on the one hand, and the iron factory like "a volcano spitting fire," furnaces, and the "glowing metal" on the other. The interplay of these contrasts then gives the strong visual effects upon Carlyle. This is a perfect example of Burkean sublime.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, Carlyle raises a voice against the smoking and fiery industry in this passage, but it is not hard to imagine that he is so absorbed with the spectacle that he cannot stop such a meticulous and long description of the scene. What does this response of Carlyle's mean? And what does this suggest for our understanding of his theory of "fiery" hero?

III. Technological Development and Mechanical Imagination

With all the information into consideration, now we cannot simply take for granted Carlyle's antagonism against steam power. Though he detests the steam engine as an embodiment of utilitarian and materialist society, he is strangely preoccupied with it as a source of power. Hero's lightning cannot be distinguished from the steam-engine's fire or the glow of the steel-mill. It may sound exaggerating, when I insist that there runs a vein of mechanical imagination in Carlyle's thought. Yet, I believe that he could not resist a temptation of power produced by the machine, just as other contemporary people couldn't either.¹⁰¹ And also that his theory on hero-worship was shaped, at least partly, after the mechanism of steam- or fire-engine.

Then what does this ambivalence tell us about Carlyle's thought? As a conclusion of the present essay, I will provide two possibilities for this question. First, the technological development did not only produce his aversion but, in spite of himself, it also permeated and framed his ways of thinking on a deeper level. In other words, it may be possible to regard his schematization of hero-worship as an evidence for Otto Mayr's proposition: "Technology as a fundamental human activity is intimately related to all other human activities and thus is an integral, indispensable part of human culture and is not, as one often hears, an alien, inhuman force unleashed upon mankind by some external agent."¹⁰² However strongly Carlyle declared his hatred against the machine, he could not avoid its influence upon himself. Thus, the steam engine has two faces in his theory: on one level, it signifies the embodiment of materialism and utilitarianism; but on the other level, it provides a basic framework for his discussion of hero-worship.¹⁰³

Secondly, if the first point can be admitted, it is possible to point out an unexpected connection between Carlyle and his antagonist, Jeremy Bentham. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle expresses his overt abhorrence against Bentham, who, according to him, is a twin piece of the steam engine: "Benthamee Utility, virtue by Profit and Loss; reducing this God's-world to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains on..." (H, 76). Here Carlyle's

terminology is to the point, because Bentham actually compares the working of society to that of the steam engine: "The State has two great engines, punishment and reward."⁶⁹ Now that we admit that the steam engine works metaphorically in the formulation of Carlyle's theory, however, his denunciation of Bentham sounds quite ironical.⁶⁸

Although Carlyle never advocated "Benthamee" utilitarianism, his theory on hero has something in common with Bentham's model of social regulation. As Michel Foucault illustrates in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Bentham's Panopticon is a monumental institution of the method of modern social regulation. It converts human body into a commodity of potential utility under its normalizing effect. In such a condition, each individual cannot be distinguished from the others, so that everybody looks like each other. They are deprived of their own motivations and even identities, and at last they become docile automata, or mere parts of the great machine of society.⁶⁸ Apparently, this method of social discipline marks the remotest point from that of Carlyle's hero-worship. It was against this paralyzed state of society that he proposed his theory on hero. However, both methods of social management share one thing with each other: that is, they never admit the working of free will of people. Indeed, the purpose of hero-worship is to take in divine "Force" through God-inspired heroes, to the extent that everybody becomes such heroes and that the society of heroes comes true. It seems to lead to spiritual revelation, not to mechanical subjection. Yet, no matter how great such heroes are, they look like puppets—puppets operated by divine power—, because, according to him, they unconsciously follow divine scripts which have been naturally gifted to them: "But there is more in Shakespeare's intellect than we have yet seen. It is what I call an unconscious intellect; there is more virtue in it than he himself is aware of. Novalis beautifully remarks of him, that those Dramas of his are Products of Nature, too, deep as Nature herself. I Find a great truth in this saying. Shakespeare's Art is not Artifice; the noblest worth of it is not there by plan or precontrivance. It grows-up from the deeps of Nature, through this noble sincere soul, who is a voice of Nature" (*H*, 108-09). If even Shakespeare is a puppet of "Nature," this is still more the case with ordinary people, who are taught by Carlyle to worship him passively. It is clear that there is no room for human free will in society of heroes, as well as in Bentham's mechanized model of Panoptic society.

Viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that Carlyle's model of hero-worship resembles a mechanical artifact. It had originally contained a seed which grew into a form of anti-volutionist conception of mankind, which probably found a fit metaphor for itself in the steam engine.

Thus we have come to that old debate between soul and body, or the "vitalist" theory and the "mechanist" theory at last.⁶⁷ If Carlyle had been asked which is the primal element of human beings, soul or body, then he would have never failed to answer, "Soul." In this sense, he is a vitalist, not a mechanist who makes the most of physical functions of human body. However, the problem is that what he means by "soul" is not human soul, but divine one. The more powerfully he advocates the divine influx of spiritual essence into human beings, the more

human free will is ignored, so that his theory comes to look like the mechanist theory paradoxically. His ambivalence toward the steam engine is a covert and unwitting sign of this problem he bears.

Notes

1 Samuel Smiles, *Lives of Boulton and Watt* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1865): 3-4.

2 Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841; Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966): 8. All subsequent citations from this volume are marked by its abbreviated form of title, *H*, and page numbers in parentheses.

3 I chiefly deal with *On Heroes* in this essay, but sometimes I consult other short essays: "Signs of the Times," in *The Complete Works of Thomas Carlyle*, vol. 7 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 19--): 462-87; *Past and Present* (London: Everyman's Library, 1970): 259-66. All subsequent citations from each volume are marked by its abbreviated form of title, *CW* or *PP*, and page numbers in parentheses.

4 The term "enchantment" is frequently used in "Midas," *Past and Present*, 1-6. See also Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 21.

5 See Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 28, 45, 64, 67, 77, 92, 115, 117, 157, 168, 186 and 219.

6 For example, see Samuel Smiles, *Lives of Boulton and Watt*, 74. See also an entry "steam-engine" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

7 Subsequent quotations from this letter is from Alexander Carlyle, ed., *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1923): 223.

8 Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983): 100-01.

9 Edwin W. Marrs, Jr., ed., *The Letters of Thomas Carlyle to His Brother Alexander, with Related Family Letters* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1968): 177-78.

10 "[D]arkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990): 73. For the interpretation of relationship between a sense of sublime and technological artifacts, I am deeply indebted to David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

11 The contemporaries' responses toward the steam engine or technological progress are divided into two: the one welcomed it feverishly and regarded it mainly as a testimony of human progress; and the other detested it as a source of capitalist abuse of society. In England, the steam-powered factory was operated by the 1780's, a period of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. David E. Nye suggests that this is partly why the British "critique of factories. . . was framed primarily in terms of social class." See Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, 110. As for proponents of the steam engine, see Heather Henderson and William Sharpe, eds., *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* vol. 2B: The Victorian Age (New York: Longman, 1999):

1097, 1098-1100.

12 Otto Mayr, *Authority, Liberty and Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986): xv.

13 Obviously, Carlyle is not the only one who hated, but at the same time, was lured to contemporary technological development. Carlyle's American twin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, also betrays his own preoccupation with machines in his writings. Like Carlyle, Emerson characterizes the world of great men as a "great machine" in his *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (1850), though he hates the mechanical conditions of contemporary American society. "Hear the shouts in the street! The people cannot see him [the hero] enough. They delight in a man. Here is a head and a trunk! What a front; what eyes; Atlantean shoulders; and the whole carriage heroic, with equal inward force to guide the great machine!" (Emerson 9)

In Emerson's schematization of the ideal society, the term "balance" is most important. The hero is an embodiment of the balance between metaphysical and physical faculties, and the relationship between the hero and common people should be also balanced. And this balance has a mechanical implication, which is shown when Emerson refers to it as a "balance-wheel" of the clock machinery. "This balance-wheel which the sculptor found in architecture, the perilous irritability of poetic talent found in the accumulated dramatic materials to which the people were already wonted, and which had a certain excellence, which no single genius, however extraordinary, could hope to create" (Emerson 112).

14 Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to Principles of Moral and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996): xviii., 18.

15 Carlyle shows the same abhorrence once more in the text:

I call this gross, steamengine Utilitarianism an approach towards new Faith. It was a laying-down of cant; a saying to oneself: "Well then, this world is a dead iron machine, the god of it Gravitation and selfish Hunger; let us see what, by checking and balancing, good adjustment of tooth and pinion, can be made of it!" Benthamism has something complete, manful, in such fearless committal of itself to what it finds true; you may call it Heroic, though a Heroism with its eyes put out! (H, 172)

16 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Especially, see Part 3 "Discipline," 135-228.

17 As for the mechanist and vitalist theories, I consult Simon Schaffer, "Enlightened Automata," in William Clark, Jan Golinski, and Simon Schaffer, eds., *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999): 126-65.

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