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Representing Humanity, the Mechanical Metaphor, and Acts of Memory

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Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) represents humanity's natural state as the nightmarish scenario of perpetual warfare mechanically entailed by each individual's self-interested pursuit of his own survival unhindered by any opposing force, a life that is, famously, 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.' (*Leviathan*, I.xiii.186)¹. For Hobbes, to escape from this internecine conflict, men must yield sovereignty to a monarch empowered to rule the people to ensure the possibility of peace and the establishment of a commonwealth or civil society (*Leviathan*, II.xvii.227). Underpinning Hobbes's mechanistic political theory is a theory of mind that describes all thoughts deterministically as representations, and memory as a merely passive consequence of the mechanical ways in which sensation functions. Hobbes's representation of humanity is thus an early example of a highly influential trend in Enlightenment theoretical discourse to rely upon notions concerning the mechanically determined operation of physical bodies and a language and models of material causation – what I shall call the mechanical metaphor².

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. MacPherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, repr. 1981; first publ. 1651).

2. Compare, Tom Sorell, 'Hobbes' Scheme of the Sciences,' *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, ed. by Tom Sorell (Cambridge: Cambridge U P), 48-61 (48; 53; 57-58); Douglas Jesseph, 'Hobbes and the Method of Natural Science,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 86-107 (86); Jan Prins, 'Hobbes on Light and Vision,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 129-156 (131); Ralph Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 61-71.

Hobbes's theory of mind emphatically derives all thought from sense (or sensation) as 'The Originall of them all', 'the Thoughts of man [...being] every one a *Representation*' (*Leviathan*, I.i.85). As all thought originates from sensation, the representations in the mind (imagination's products) are nothing more than '*decaying sense*' (*Leviathan*, I.ii.88). Imagination is identified with memory: 'when we would express the *decay*, and signifie that the Sense is fading, old, and past, it is called *Memory*. So that *Imagination* and *Memory*, are but one thing' (*Leviathan*, I.ii.89). Consistent with the radical nature of Hobbes's reductively mechanistic philosophy, a thing imagined, such as a Centaur, is merely manufactured by *compounding* the things – man and horse – that were previously sensed and imagined singly (*Leviathan*, I.ii.89). But to form the dismembered parts required for compounding new wholes necessarily involves severance. Hence Hobbes's own representation of man in a state of nature involves compounding but also dismembering, not only to isolate its components, but also (through representing human thoughts as exclusively representative) Hobbes severs mankind from external reality.

The representation that is any given thought about the world stands excluded from the external world it only putatively depicts and yet which is fundamental to the persuasive realism of Hobbes's political theory. Hobbes avers that the state of nature – a state of *absolute* 'warre of every man against every man' – never had any real existence and, since it 'was never generally so, over all the world', he is admitting that his state of nature is fictional or theoretical (*Leviathan*, I.xiii.187; 188). In keeping with his mechanical psychology, the theoretical construction that is Hobbes's state of nature is compounded of several parts: a generally prevailing *disposition* of humanity to war; an appeal to the selected 'Experience' of people arming themselves and locking their doors against others; some instances of 'savage people in many places of *America*'; and, the very point that is even implicit at the beginning of his treatise, that as all thought is representative, humankind (by virtue of the most intimate aspects of its nature) is solitary, detached from the world and yet explicable as though functioning exactly like physical causation,

such as we experience with regard to the motion of bodies and the behaviour of light (*Leviathan*, I.i.85; I.ii.88; xiii.186-7).

To accept Hobbes's representation of humanity in a state of nature uncritically, is to yield to the seductive authority of representation's supposed faithfulness to a reality that Hobbes's own theory of mind unwittingly violates. It does this by forcefully detaching thought from an external reality it dismembers and re-members in theorising civil/regulated society's pre-civil state of nature as the defining chaotic prime matter of isolated and unsustainable existence, a nihilism that has haunted European thoughts of modernity for at least some three and a half centuries. The bleak nihilism of Hobbes's representation of man in a state of nature may well be mythic and it no doubt perpetrates a myth of savage/natural existence as forbiddingly unsustainable. But Hobbes's representative thesis of thought, as it fundamentally isolates the reality of an external world from humanity by its insistence that all thought is representation, presciently relocates reality in a new age of mechanism in which human nature becomes increasingly mechanised and memory's social realisation through its complex relation with an audience, the truth, place, narrative, values, beliefs, the present, art, is traduced to the inferior status of a decaying sense, the decadent waste matter of modernity's perverse obsession increasingly to the exclusion of everything else – with now. Humanity's age-old preoccupation with recounting, representing, and living in active communion with the past as a rich body of narratives to be involved in the present and sanctified through honouring the ancestors, customs, and wisdom of accumulated tradition, is effectually dismissed by Hobbes as a decaying corpse, compared to the striking vivacity of present sensation.

For much of the time when Hobbes was writing *Leviathan*, he lived virtually in exile at Paris, dreading to return to an England full of danger. However, the context of his political theory was markedly English and developed in response to the social upheaval of mid-17th-century revolutionary England³.

3. Noel Malcolm, 'A Summary Biography of Hobbes,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 13-44 (31-33).

Hobbes's representation of the people was therefore produced within a context of great terror, distrust, and brutal conflict, which it represents through representing humanity's condition in a state of nature as one of perpetual warfare. In the following century, several decades prior to the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau represented the natural state in near-diametrically opposite terms to those of Hobbes. Rousseau's thought experiment is similarly an attempt to envisage a pre-civil state without laws or any other kind of artificial means of regulating conduct. However, for Rousseau, instead of the pre-civil state being one of chaotic strife, he theorised the radical alternative of a quasi-Edenic condition of peaceful innocence. In the first part of his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau's representation of humanity in a state of nature as fundamentally timid, equal, and peaceful forms the basis of his critique of both Hobbes's conception of the state of nature, and civil society's establishment of inequalities⁴. Significantly, the anti-mechanism of Rousseau's conception of the original state of nature is mainly evident in the great emphasis he gives to the inscrutable, spiritual nature of freedom ('the power of willing, or rather of choosing') as a distinctively human characteristic⁵.

Both Hobbes and Rousseau have of course been highly influential in shaping political thought and, as Patrick Riley claims, Rousseau may be thought of as 'the finest critic of Hobbes'⁶. Their respective representations of humanity's natural or pre-civil state are integral to their influence. And yet

4. For example, see Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, in *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, ed. by Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1997), 111-231 (135-6; 142-3; 152). Compare, Ronald Grimsley, *The Philosophy of Rousseau* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1973), 30-31.

5. See Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 140-1; 149-50; James Miller, 'Introduction', in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. by Donald A. Cress (Indiana: Hackett, 1992), v-xviii (xiii-xv).

6. Tom Sorell, 'Introduction,' in *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 1-12 (1-2); Patrick Riley, 'Introduction: Life and Works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778),' in *Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2001), 1-7 (1).

both are misleading in representing humanity's natural state. For example, and most simply, Rousseau arguably exaggerates the extent of freedom, peacefulness, and the innocence of the savage, whereas (in an opposite direction) Hobbes exaggerates the extent to which man in a state of nature is determined or necessitated by selfishness, the resultant inevitability of strife, and humanity's incapacity for self-government. For all that the competing representations of humanity in a state of nature, by Hobbes and Rousseau, are in certain respects opposing misrepresentations of the pre-civil human condition, they indicate contrary aspects of humanity's greatest hopes and fears concerning the human condition as social, though by no means naturally so – for both Hobbes and Rousseau man in a state of nature is originally or naturally solitary/ asocial⁷.

The extent to which one might be persuaded by any given representation of humanity, and the extent to which one is then inclined to act in accordance with one's preferred representation, is all highly debatable. This is subject matter for much more extensive studies of the influencing role of ideologies founded on or interwoven with representing humanity. However, taking for granted that one's major assumptions concerning human conduct are likely to have important implications for how one represents, thinks about, and acts with regard to humanity, are there not more fundamental issues to do with the pervasiveness of *representation* and with how easy it therefore is to incorporate profoundly dangerous assumptions in representing the human condition? If humanity's aptitude for representation is somehow involved in easing the way for major assumptions to slide into our thinking concerning humankind as primarily isolated and mechanically determined to act in certain fundamentally inhumane ways – as is so starkly evident in Hobbes's theory of the state of nature – is this pervasiveness of representation part of a much graver problem of uncritical assimilation of overly extensive notions with the power to influence general attitudes towards humanity in ways that are deeply pernicious?

7. For example, see Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 139. Compare David Gautier, *Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2006), 6-10.

Representation is often thought of as a characteristically modern/ postmodern phenomenon. Two recent writers on the subject of political representation assert that representation 'permeates our everyday lives to such an extent that we hardly notice it. Our innermost thoughts are made up of representations of the external world'⁸. To be sure, representation is seemingly all-pervasive, but this last claim concerning the representative nature of our *thoughts* (though, as argued above, fundamental to Hobbes's theories of mind and politics), was once a much more intensely debated topic at the heart of major influential philosophical arguments concerning perception. In the direct realism of the Scottish philosophy of Common Sense during the 18th century, opposition to the notion that all perception is representative was a distinguishing characteristic of this school of thought and one of its central concerns involved a critique and rejection of the mechanical metaphor.⁹ However, as I shall argue, this tradition in philosophy evolved during the early post-Enlightenment period to incorporate a representative dimension of memory that continued to oppose the implications of passivity inherent within the mechanical metaphor. It did this through asserting that memory involves action. Such a notion of memory as an *act* of representation is in turn particularly apposite with regard to the development of early post-Enlightenment historiography by one of the most distinctive and influential British historians of the period who insightfully drew attention to the mechanical metaphor in his 'Signs of the Times' (1829), Thomas Carlyle.

Everywhere, it seems, we confront and utilize representation. Works of art, literature, historiography, public and private discourse are replete with particular representations of things, people, and of the human condition. My explanation for this apparent pervasiveness and prevalence of representation is impudently this: representation is *an ability of easy virtue* if only because it is so extremely useful that human existence without it is barely imaginable. I can represent a car crash with two buttons,

8. Mónica Brito Vieira and David Runciman, *Representation* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 3.

9. For example, see Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought*, 119-121.

and then immediately re-use them to represent flying saucers, or overlap one with the other to indicate how two notions share certain properties in common – just about anything will do to represent something else. And, if at times, largely due to a resemblance between the representing entity and the thing being represented, one thing represents something better than another, in other circumstances *dissimilarity* enhances representational efficacy. Since the ability to represent is therefore weakly dependent on the suitability of the materials for doing so, the calibre of a particular representation may have more to do with the *ability* to represent – the *action* of representing – than the degree of fitness or similarity between the representation and the thing being represented. Thus, effective representation may have much more to do with the *activity* of representing – the manner or style or inventiveness of the delivery – than the *materials* used to constitute the representation and its verisimilitude. Hence, an ineloquent speech that represents some information may be effective largely due to the ways in which, unaided by elaborate technical apparatus, it conveys authenticity to a responsive audience, persuading by means of largely un-quantifiable human characteristics of charisma, personal authority, or as Aristotle claims, with regard to matters where two competing opinions may be reasonably entertained, ‘character [*ethos*] contains almost the strongest proof of all’¹⁰.

However, if the representation – say, of humanity in a state of nature as described by Hobbes – involves some claim, explicit or otherwise, that the representation is importantly similar and thus closely analogous to a real state of affairs (consider Hobbes’s reference to native American tribes), then the quality of the representation must be capable of being at least partly evaluated in relation to its similitude to the thing or state of affairs being represented. That seems to take us towards making claims about reality. However (to re-quote Vieira and Runciman), if even ‘[o]ur innermost thoughts are made up of representations of the external world’ – if Hobbes’s claim that all thought is representative implies

10. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, ed. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1991), 75 [1356a].

a critical severance from reality, as I argued at the outset – is it *possible* to judge the degree of similitude between representation and some real state of affairs? Does Hobbes's position with regard to reality (as something only ever available to us as representations) operate as a defeater against every attempt to critique his political theory and its representation of humanity, say, by means of appeals to anthropological studies that overwhelmingly contest the accuracy of his representation? If so, in his theories of mind and politics, and his whole portrayal of the human condition in a state of nature as one of dreadful inhumane savagery, from which our only escape is by means of self-subjugation to an uneasy relationship with the supreme power of the monarch, Hobbes's mechanisation of humanity eludes attempts to recover humanity's humane potential to think and act independently of the determining material conditions that prescribe for us a social contract founded on and perpetuating our fear of each other and the nihilism of a war of all against all. Furthermore, if Hobbes's theory of mind does disable critique, as I am trying to suggest, does this render us incapable (argumentatively at least) of emerging from the trajectory of Enlightenment materialism that has so powerfully enmeshed us within its mechanistic systems of depersonalising enslavement to oppressive assumptions of isolation, amoralistic competitiveness, aggressive consumption of material goods, and a dangerous disconnection from nature and other people?

If representation is all-pervasive, are we not locked into a system akin to what Jean Baudrillard describes as the *hyperreal*, a realm filled with simulacra having no discernible original object?¹¹ In the postmodern world, where subject and object seem to have collapsed into one another and the simulacra constitute all experience within a universe that has completely displaced the individual and all agency, it *is* extremely hard to see how one can even talk of something that is *not* representative. But

11. For example see, Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant with introduction by Mike Gane (London: Sage, 1993; first publ. as *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (Gallimard, 1976), 71-2; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Shiela Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994; first publ. in French, 1981), 1-8.

why worry about this? Do we not function perfectly well within an all-pervasive context of representation and is it not the case that representatives can do everything that some putatively non-representative experiences may be supposed capable of performing?¹² If, at first, one looks aghast at the notion that, through total immersion in the hyperreal, there is no genuine meaning to 'personal identity' and that 'agency' is also merely something represented and in being so is without a corresponding experiential reality (all experience being comprised of representations), we seem perfectly capable of adapting to such an existence of absolute representationism, an existence without some form of direct contact with the real. Reality – or what one formerly took to be reality – may evanesce into the mere negative of our representation-saturated existence because, not only is representation extremely useful for reducing tremendously complex things to speedily grasped simple ones, and not only does it thereby become pervasive, but representations can appear coherent. Representations may relate so closely to one another that any notional need for certain standards of truth and reality become at best otiose. Representations seem to inform or modify other representations progressively; a particular representation may become increasingly enriched through its relation to other representations. Furthermore, recent advanced technologies of representation, exponentially developing ever greater richness of detail, seem destined to project a rich plenum once thought only possible with regard to natural phenomena. Alongside the much more alluring productions of hyperreality, nature seems to be increasingly relegated to dull insignificance.

More mundanely, certain representations can be so clustered and brought into relation with one another that they begin to comprise the very sort of deep reading indicative of what it is to know a thing or be well acquainted with it. For example, reading the representative criss-crossing of the visual components in a painting to form a critical interpretation of it, one thereby becomes better acquainted with or comes to know the painting.

12. Compare J.L. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 43-47.

Consider the delightfully sensuous representations of plain or simple domestic scenes in the work of the 18th-century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin: a boy stands absorbed watching a spinning top, the ordinary moment represented, but Chardin also represents the rapid passage of time as the top's spinning is arrested in the picture that at once also captures the child's idle *waste* of time; the books on the desk sit unopened, the blank paper lies cast aside, the boy's forefinger and thumb is held vacantly on the desk *as if* holding the quill which stands apart in the inkpot unused¹³. One representation informs another within the picture, generating a more complex moral narrative of the various signs of absence and missed opportunity. As the painting is read in some such way, its mere visual similarity to the physical objects it depicts rightly becomes a subject of comparative insignificance – knowing *this* painting involves reading off, understanding, and being able to articulate the ways its various representations operate as signs of a more extended narrative, a reading that is also an evaluation of certain aspects of our relations with time, education, play, and economics.

The ability to utter the statement 'everything is representative', the ease with which we make use of our ability to represent, the value of our ability to represent, the importance to us of being able to generate further representations as part of the process of critically examining a representation, and the relevance to sociological, political, and economic experiences and theories of postmodern existence – the sense of being permeated by an astonishing volume of cultural evidence supporting the notion that everything is representative, including our innermost thoughts – should not hoodwink us into thinking that *there can therefore be nothing except representation*. The pervasiveness and seeming prevalence of representation does not *imply* that everything *must* be a representation. But while such a seemingly simple logical point is easily stated – say, that for the re-presentative to *re-present* there *must* be something

13. I am here referring to Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, 'Boy with a Spinning Top,' Musée Du Louvre, Paris, France, 29.92 inch wide x 26.38 inch high (see [http://www.jean-baptiste-simeon-chardin.org/Boy-with-a-Spinning-Top-\(Auguste-Gabriel-Godefroy\).html](http://www.jean-baptiste-simeon-chardin.org/Boy-with-a-Spinning-Top-(Auguste-Gabriel-Godefroy).html)).

presentative – we may still ask, can we ever *escape* representation? Can we ever have anything unmediated or *present* to our minds except representations? Experience suggests that representations are often to an extensive degree markedly different from the things they represent – the picture’s two-dimensional, fifteen by ten centimetre rectilinear shape is in these characteristics alone radically different from the three-dimensional vastness of the mountain scene it so faithfully depicts. As soon as this aspect of representation is brought to the fore, the assertion that ‘everything is a representation’ becomes immediately problematic since if this is true, nothing seems any longer sufficiently reliable. In a universe of absolute representationism, there seems to be no way of resolving differences of opinion concerning reality – the absolutes: ‘*everything* is representative’ and its corollary, ‘there are *no* presentative entities’, appear to underpin an absolute relativism that generates doubts about the warrantability of all competing representations.

Whatever the cultural or political origins and degree of prominence of the Scottish philosophical concern with representation, I think it is fair to say that the tendency to question representative theses of perception flowered during the Scottish Enlightenment’s central epistemological argument between the two closely related and yet markedly distinct philosophies of David Hume’s *mechanically* modelled theory of ideas as a representative thesis of perception (and its resultant absolute scepticism), and Thomas Reid’s critique of this scepticism and of Hume’s use of the theory of ideas (inherited from the English philosopher, John Locke). If Hume’s system – if Locke’s and indeed the system of a great many other philosophers besides – does indeed rely upon a representative thesis of perception in which some intermediary *re*-presents the real, then what might be the potential implications for an understanding of the human condition, of so describing that intermediary – the *tertium quid* – in *some specific way*?

Metaphysical theories of the mind that attempt to address epistemological questions such as concern how we know what we claim to know by means of what our senses represent to us of the external world of physical objects or of other minds,

are inherently describing or representing some key notions to do with what it is to *be* human, at least with regard to the important aspect of cognition. In so describing or representing humanity, the metaphysician or epistemologist needs to have a care as to just *how* he is representing humanity or *what* he is representing humanity as being. For, if an intermediary or representative *thing* or *process* that we describe *mechanistically* is introduced into the human system, as some necessary *tool* for furnishing us with all of our ideas, then does this not *place within the system a mechanical device* that effectually traduces human cognition and our whole being to the very machine-like physical nature which (at least from the Enlightenment) has so often been regarded as un-problematically ours to do with as we will? This is to suggest that the introduction of mechanism (or a *language* of the mechanical), into the human system, is at once related to the problem of viewing nature *functionally* as a mere system of mechanically operating causation principally existing to serve our ends – a radical anthropocentrism – and also, that to introduce a mechanical language into the human subject's most private and theoretic realm of the mind, can be thought of as akin to performing a lobotomy on the whole of humanity. Such a *re*-presentation of the human condition – so clearly echoing the mechanical psychology of Hobbes, but more often linked with Locke – is one that utterly displaces the soul, or all that was thought to be immaterial, unique, and worthy of respect¹⁴. Humanity becomes *no more than a mechanism* by being theoretically discussed as though the mechanical analogy between mind and body – the mechanical metaphor – involves little or no disanalogous characteristics. One might even venture to say at this point, that the major problem with the mechanical metaphor has to do with the potential fallaciousness of analogical reasoning as a symptom of uncritical, and unsophisticated thought and argumentation that is peculiarly susceptible to rhetorical manipulation. But to return to the point in hand: once so identified with the mechanical and hence with all that

14. Compare Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U P, 2010), 6.

functions with predictable regularity as fully subservient to the dictates of material necessity, our dreams, hopes, fears, ideas, sympathies, beliefs, values, motives for action become at best perilously endangered as of mere instrumental or practical value. Our whole moral and cultural being once *mechanized*, humanity, and all of the humane activities that are historically of vital importance to human well-being and flourishing, become little better than some extension of a reductively instrumental project of material science; we become, in another language, mere commodities. Fortunately, realisation of this is the first step to finding such an oppressive and decidedly dangerous representation of humanity intolerable.

Reid pinpointed something profoundly wrong about how philosophers had, as he saw it, invented *on their sole authority*, representative theses of the mind that flatly contradicted and placed philosophy at war with our common apprehensions, our common experience of the world, our unshakeable belief in our capacities to know, reason, think, judge, and join with others in the socially necessary function of discourse. In doing so Reid indicates his awareness that the Lockean theory of ideas used by Hume was mechanical, deterministic, and rendered the mind merely passive, something acted upon by the physical, and thus incapable of genuine agency¹⁵.

But to pass over the Scottish Enlightenment's robust struggle with the representative theory of perception, the mechanical metaphor as such was probably first brought to more widespread public attention by Thomas Carlyle in his brilliant and highly influential essay in the June edition of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829, 'Signs of the Times'. In this essay, Carlyle rather famously declared that the epithet that best characterised 'this age of ours' was 'The Mechanical Age'¹⁶. However, later in the essay

15. For example, see Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid*, preface, notes, and supplementary dissertations by Sir William Hamilton (Edinburgh: MacLachlan, Stewart; London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1846), *Inquiry*, I.iii.101; V.vii.127; *Intellectual Powers*, II.x.283.

16. Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times,' in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by H.D. Traill, Centenary Edition, 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896-99), vol. 27, 59.

he draws attention to some of the *metaphorical* uses of the term 'machine', indicating as he does so that the metaphor has spread itself across virtually every domain of human activity, such that government, education, science, and metaphysics has become mechanical. He rails against the mechanistic philosophy of Locke as in a sense the father of 'our whole Metaphysics'¹⁷. Carlyle is here touching on something of enormous importance. This, I would say, is a most pivotal moment in European and American cultural history with regard to representation and the mechanical metaphor, though its intellectual and cultural significance remains yet to be more fully explored.

Within a few years Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34) made its first appearance. This dazzling counterblast against the materialism, mechanism, and scepticism that Carlyle saw as the 19th-century's inheritance from the dispiriting and dehumanising characteristics of the Enlightenment legacy, commenced an important upsurge of various counter-cultural movements opposed in one way or another to the rapidly engrossing power of industrial capitalism and its close ally, the mechanical metaphor. At this time – the late 1820s though the early 30s – the course of literature, art, and philosophy in Britain begins to tilt in quite new directions, breaking away from or at least trying to counter the deadening hand of largely Enlightenment-generated materialist and absolutist conceptions of humanity.

Carlyle's much-admired friend, the metaphysician and logician, Sir William Hamilton, was also tackling the mechanical metaphor, though in much more esoteric ways. Within just a few months of Carlyle's 'Signs of the Times' and also in the liberal *Edinburgh Review*, Hamilton commenced a whole series of some 16 weighty articles all published between 1829 and 1839 that would establish his fame as one of Britain's foremost philosophers of the day. The first of Hamilton's articles, 'Philosophy of the Unconditioned' (1829), was on the philosophy of the French philosopher Victor Cousin in 1829 – an article that would later be seen as fundamental to the development

17. Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times,' 64.

of agnosticism by Darwin's bulldog, Thomas Huxley¹⁸. The second article by Hamilton, 'Philosophy of Perception' (1830), was an extended review notionally on the publication of a translation of the *Works* of Thomas Reid into French by another Frenchman, the philosophical commentator, Théodore Simon Jouffroy, a translation that incorporated some fragments of the philosophical writings of Pierre Paul Royer-Collard – this review by Hamilton had little to say about Jouffroy, though it praised his translation of Reid 'as another sign of the convalescence of philosophy, in a great and influential nation' (*Discussions*, 39)¹⁹.

In this second article, the 'Philosophy of Perception', Hamilton provides an incisive discussion about the Scottish philosophy of Common Sense, concentrating on, among many other things, *representation*. He outlines a variety of representative theories of perception, all of which, according to Hamilton, give rise to varying degrees or types of scepticism (*Discussions*, 62-64; 97). Hamilton articulates Reid's philosophy as the doctrine of *natural realism* or *natural dualism*. This is fundamentally a theory of perception that importantly regards the mind as active in perception and the elementary deliverances of consciousness as inescapably and unanalysably truthful and *non-representative*. But, interestingly, though perhaps not too surprisingly, Hamilton uses a phrase to describe the direct cognition of reality that re-appears as a significant notion in the work of at least one 20th-century phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas: *face to face*²⁰.

According to Hamilton, Reid 'asserts that, in his doctrine of perception, the external reality stands, to the percipient mind, face to face, in the same immediacy of relation which the idea holds

18. See Jessop, 'Carlyle's Agnosticism: An Altar to the Unknown and Unknowable God,' *Literature and Belief*, 25, 1&2 (2005): 381-433.

19. Sir William Hamilton, 'Philosophy of Perception,' in *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform*, 2nd edn. (London: Brown, Green and Longmans; Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, 1853), 39-99. All references to Hamilton's 'Philosophy of Perception' and 'Philosophy of the Unconditioned' are to this edition.

20. See, Tamara Gosta, 'Anxious Translation: Disfiguring the Face of the Past in Carlyle's Historical Vision,' in *Proceedings of The Carlyle Conference (Dumfries) 2008*, forthcoming in online format.

in the representative theory of the philosophers' (*Discussions*, 59; and see 60). However, elsewhere in Hamilton, he quotes from what must surely be the source of this seemingly commonplace phrase, namely, the Bible, I Corinthians 13.12: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' (*Discussions*, 635). Hamilton uses this part of scripture to illustrate his doctrine of *learned ignorance* in which he emphasises the vastness of our ignorance compared with the tiny extent of our knowledge – so, in short, he seems to be using the phrase 'face to face' to indicate how severely circumscribed our knowledge is, how limited this face to face perception is, in which there is no representative medium but instead the consciousness of a fundamentally important duality or correlative difference between the I and the not-I, the self and the not-self. So important is Hamilton's reference to Corinthians and the notion of a face to face direct cognition of presentative reality, that this very passage from the Bible was finally inscribed on his tomb. However, that aside, the *act* of perception, for Hamilton, discloses at once two aspects – the duality of the self and the not-self, the knower and the known, or in looser and more modern parlance, the self and the other (*Discussions*, 54-5). This phenomenalism, this relative knowledge of a face to face cognition of two branches of the same indivisible intuition, is, for Hamilton, one of the given foundations of all knowledge, indeed of the very *possibility* of all knowledge. Hamilton argues forcefully in defence of Reid's philosophy of Common Sense, regarding Reid's answer to the brilliantly devastating scepticism of Hume, as the only properly adequate antidote to this otherwise grave and more widespread problem of an extreme scepticism. Importantly, for Hamilton, the source of various forms of scepticism is representationism, and Hume's scepticism in particular is founded on a representative theory of perception inherited from Locke – though a less sophisticated and earlier version is also at the heart of Hobbes's mechanical theories of mind and politics as intimated earlier.

This theory of a representative perception, as Hamilton suggests, arguably had much to do with the history of French philosophy during the 18th century. Hamilton quotes the French

philosopher, Cousin, on the massively prevalent influence of John Locke on 18th-century French philosophy. For Hamilton, Sensualism – or the doctrine of a representative theory of perception, as adopted from Locke by Condillac in France – did not flourish in Germany or Britain ‘where speculation has remained comparatively free’, his comparison being with France: ‘the evils which arose in France, arose from the benumbing influence of a one effete philosophy; and have, in point of fact, mainly been corrected [within the 1820s] by the awakened spirit of metaphysical inquiry’ (*Discussions*, 42). I think it is fair to regard Hamilton’s remarks here as elliptically referring to the absolutism of the French monarchy but also to the French Revolution, and my guess is that he is trying to insinuate that, as he puts it, ‘The state of thralldom in [France] during the [18th] century to one chronic despotism’ had much to do with the French people’s rightful overthrow of monarchical rule and the aristocracy, a dangerous sentiment to articulate openly in Britain during the 1830s. But in addition to this, Hamilton may also be suggesting that, with regard to the dominance and implications of Condillac’s sensualist Lockean philosophy, unlike the situation in Britain where Reid had countered the dreadful scepticism of Hume, how the French people conducted themselves during the bloodbath of the terror, also owed much to Condillac’s dominance and thereby the uncritical adoption of a chronically despotic philosophical theory disastrously founded on a representative thesis of knowledge – and a particularly mechanical one at that. By contrast with the situation in France, according to Hamilton, Reid had quelled the very kind of materialist or sensuist philosophy that had been so disastrously adopted in France under the despotic rule of Condillac.

Hamilton’s engagement with Reid’s work involved an increasingly minute critique of what Hamilton regarded as Reid’s blunders due to his comparative ignorance of a detailed knowledge of the history of philosophy. One of the flaws was Reid’s failure to distinguish between *intuitive* and *representative* knowledge – ‘a distinction [according to Hamilton] without which his peculiar philosophy is naught’ (*Discussions*, 46). More specifically again, Reid’s treatment of memory as an

immediate – that is *non*-representative – operation of the mind, was, for Hamilton, quite erroneous. Hamilton remarks at one point on ‘Reid’s superstitious horror of’ the representative character of the theory of ideas (*Discussions*, 53). He complains that Reid is wrong in describing memory as ‘an immediate knowledge of the past’, since, while we may be conscious of the act of remembering, we cannot be said to be conscious of the *past* if only because it is just that, past, no longer existent. The only *face to face*, immediate, intuitive knowledge that Hamilton seems to allow is one that is *present*. By contrast, memory, or the *act* of remembering, though this is also something we *do* now – in the present – does not have a present *object* but rather a *re-presented* one, a past event or thing that no longer *is*. As Hamilton puts it:

An *immediate knowledge of the past* is a contradiction in terms. This is manifest, whether we look *from the act to the object*, or *from the object to the act*. – To be known *immediately*, an *object* must be known *in itself*; to be known in itself, it must be known as actual, now existent, *present*. [and note that by the phrase ‘in itself’ Hamilton does not mean *known absolutely and in itself*, but rather he means ‘only, that it stands face to face, in direct and immediate relation to the conscious mind’ (*Discussions*, 54)] But the object of memory is *past* – not present, not now existent, not actual; it cannot therefore be known in itself. If known at all, it must be known in something different from itself; i.e. *mediately*. (*Discussions*, 49-50).

Hence, for Hamilton, our knowledge of the past by means of our memory of the past, is *mediative*. Memory is *representative*, unlike our cognition or consciousness at any given moment of what we confront *face to face*.

Hamilton’s treatment of memory, though brief in this article, strongly suggests the simple and yet profound point that in the act of remembering something, the *past*, as now no longer a *present* object of knowledge, ‘is known only through the *medium* of the *present*’ (*Discussions*, 50). That is to say, the past is an object knowable only through the medium or *re-presentative action* of and in the present. Hamilton’s phenomenological approach to

perception stresses the great importance of present, intuitive, face to face cognitions – a *relation* of knowledge between the self and other that must be accepted as a given indisputable starting point of *non-representative*, or direct knowledge that has dispensed with the *mechanism* of representative theses of the mind. However, in effect agreeing with Reid's opposition to whole rafts of philosophers through the ages who had articulated philosophical systems dependent upon representative theses of perception, but correcting Reid as he voiced this agreement, Hamilton also introduces representation into the system so that what we have are two types of knowledge: firstly, intuitive, immediate, direct, non-representative *and hence non-mechanical*, face to face knowledge of the existence of self and other; and secondly, *a representative knowledge* that cannot be immediate but *which also disposes of anything specifically mechanistic* as it regards, specifically with memory, our remembering as an activity or *action* of the mind in which knowing the past *is mediated through the present*. Hamilton is outlining the ways in which Reid's Common-Sense philosophy could be developed to incorporate a much-needed representative dimension – and the representative dimension Hamilton stresses, is also non-mechanical since non-passive; it relies on an insistence, consonant with Reid's emphases on mental agency, that *the mind is active in remembering*. That is to say, Hamilton is representing humanity as *active in generating memories via the present*. Thus, there is a basic though hard-won, direct and thus non-representative, non-mechanical, immediate cognition of our duality of existence, and this direct cognition is a face to face consciousness that is pointedly active – it occurs in an *act* of perception, implying that in perception the mind is not merely passive but plays a role, albeit a merely correlative one, though in an earlier article Hamilton constructs the following highly potent relativistic maxim: '*To think, is to condition*' (*Discussions*, 14). But this agency involved in each and every act of perceiving/knowing, is differently exercised when we remember. For, in the act of memory, we *re-present* the past and we do so, as Hamilton states it '*in and through the present and actual*' (*Discussions*, 52). Hamilton also touches on the subjective, incomplete, and even

transcendent nature of memory or representative knowledge as it always reaches 'beyond the sphere of consciousness' (*Discussions*, 53).

In so describing memory as active, as a *re-presenting* 'in and through the present and actual', it is almost as though Hamilton was laying down some important fundamental guidelines for Carlyle, or at least for a reading of Carlyle's texts and how they so often stress the *difficulty* and thereby *activity* of representing something, or the need for the reader to be an active participant in understanding the text, as in *Sartor Resartus* when the reader is repeatedly confronted with the fictional Editor's problems of interpreting the text and the philosophy he is trying to convey to the reader. *Sartor Resartus* is certainly radical, calling as it does for an innovative, imaginative reader capable of expanding the text's significance and grasping its organic structure of finely interwoven relatedness, and yet it is conservative, not revolutionary, in that it does not upset the old or the decaying past but forever suggests that even its apparent destruction contains within it the teeming life and rebirth of the new, as is most potently suggested by Carlyle's symbol of the Phoenix. Through this cosmic interplay Carlyle seems to be responding in a playfully brilliant and hugely imaginative manner to Hamilton's incisive and overly succinct expression of notions concerning both: the non-mechanical, non-representative dimension of relative cognition, in which the duality of our existence – a self that is always existent in relation to a not-self – is present with us in any act of perception; and also, the *re-presentative* dimension, in which our memory is involved in reproducing the past *through* the present.

But if *Sartor Resartus* is playfully Hamiltonian, less playful and altogether more serious, dramatic, and urgent is Carlyle's later text *The French Revolution* (1837). But Carlyle's *French Revolution* involves a similar struggle to reach back into the past and understand it through the present condition of mounting pressures indicating the possibility of revolution in England. Carlyle, yet again, makes much of the problem of interpreting the past, the now inanimate, *through* the present. Some of the facts, some of the historical documents, now seem

meaningless, empty, and Carlyle brings us into the struggle to see them as meaningful. This whole process of writing history, for Carlyle, is effectually an insistence that the meaning of the French Revolution is broad and deep, extensive and intensive – a subject that the text and the reader must endeavour to re-assess, re-evaluate, and strive to modify as the reader engages with thinking the past *through* the present times.

Carlyle seems to regard his grand purpose as an historian to be one that involves striving to imbue the historical fact that has lost meaning with some *thought*, re-presenting it through present concerns, bringing it from beyond the realm of our consciousness into consciousness. Here is how he does this in just one example from *The French Revolution* Book 2, chapter VI, 'Windbags' – and notice how the quotation begins:

For the present, however, consider Lonchamp; now when Lent is ending, and the glory of Paris and France has gone forth, as in annual wont. Not to assist at *Tenebris* Masses, but to sun itself and show itself, and salute the young Spring. Manifold, bright-tinted, glittering with gold; all through the Bois de Boulogne, in longdrawn variegated rows;-like longdrawn living flower-borders, tulips, dahlias, lilies of the valley; all in their moving flower-pots (of new-gilt carriages): pleasure of the eye, and pride of life! So rolls and dances the Procession: steady, of firm assurance, as if it rolled on adamant and the foundations of the world; not on mere heraldic parchment,-under which smoulders a lake of fire. Dance on, ye foolish ones; ye sought not wisdom, neither have ye found it. Ye and your fathers have sown the wind, ye shall reap the whirlwind. Was it not, from of old, written: *The wages of sin is death?*²¹

Carlyle's moralist biases drench his text, but the authority of his moral judgment here and the filmic dramaturgy of this and so many other scenes in his *French Revolution*, are partly dependent upon the reader's knowledge of the ultimate catastrophe of the French revolution, and partly on awareness of the present

21. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution, The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by H.D. Traill, Centenary Edition, 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896-99), vol. 2, 48.

mounting tensions, poverty, and worsening condition of the poor in England. Carlyle poetically metaphorizes the event, emphasising the triviality, purposelessness, ridiculousness of the gaudy procession. In doing so he makes almost no attempt to understand the occasion in its immediate historical context. Thus, by humorously satirising the scene through metaphorizing those of the procession as spring flowers 'in their moving flower-pots', the abstracted, dislocated, de-familiarised, absurd, pointless character of the historical fact of this procession becomes exaggerated. The historical occurrence is dead, its deathly character emphasised by the conspicuous artifice of tokens of fertility and life – a scene betokening the contradiction of living death. The event has almost no meaning as an occasion existing in a particular time and place – the scene is re-presented as strangely disconnected from its own true present of which the actors were unaware; they enact an empty ritual of vanity detached from the genuine religious dimension of the 'Tenebris Masses'. But its own true present context was one that can now be thought of metaphorically as a 'lake of fire' smouldering beneath, of which the gay flowers in their carriages are blissfully but dreadfully unaware – they are profoundly disconnected from the truth of their situation because so enmeshed in the hoodwinking artifices of a mere representation of self lacking genuine substance.

But what brings the dead fact of the procession to life, what *creates* it, or imbues it with significance so that we seem to come close to it almost as though we were perceiving it face to face, is the use of metaphors to emphasise the gaudy beauty and transience of *these* flowers, so like and yet so unlike the Biblical lilies to which Carlyle deftly alludes. But he informs the procession as indeed possessing a purpose or end, though one quite other than that presumably intended by the 'foolish ones'. Like numerous 18th-century satires – like the etchings and paintings of the English moralist, Hogarth – the people are portrayed weirdly as though they were quick with life, in transition, and yet actually automata, devoid of purpose, intention, and profoundly unaware of their destiny, blankly absorbed. However, through conferring a *telos* to this otherwise

pointless occasion, Carlyle quickens the event into a living, present fact, recreating the past as a representation of the past through the present. All too disturbingly aware of the mortality with which his subject matter is awash, Carlyle provides this procession with its terrible purpose, its final, unintended end in the revolution and the ensuing terror. '*The wages of sin is death*' – that, like so much in *The French Revolution*, is where this trivial and trivialised event is unstoppably heading.

Carlyle's extraordinary power as an artist of historiography, so to create a living fact out of the empty husk of a de-contextualised event, repeatedly relies upon such re-animation, such thinking the past through the present, such poetic acts of historiography akin to the action of remembering or reproducing the past via the present, a representing of the dead people of the past through their significance to the present. Through this dynamic interplay of past and present Carlyle calls his reader towards re-considering the past and present condition of humanity. The fact that he has created, or imbued with value, becomes alive as an instance of a profound irony inhering in the nature of the universe according to Carlyle. Coupled with a keen sense of matter as a substance always imminently at risk of disintegrating into phantasm, ghastly in its inert nature, Carlyle's adherence to dualism demands that for matter to possess the reality, the vitality, he believes it does or must possess, the material must be brought into life by something spiritual and transcendent, but most importantly by *our action*, by *our acts of remembering the past through the present*.

Some six years after *The French Revolution*, Carlyle published his powerful and similarly influential *Past and Present* (1843). And in this text too, he stresses, as virtually the central or overriding thesis of the work, that the past needs to be seen, in Hamiltonian terms, *through the present times*, which are themselves better understood and our duties better grasped, if and only if, in turn, we see the present *through* its relation to the past. But as in *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*, in *Past and Present* Carlyle *problematizes* both the past and the present – *how to conjure before the reader the medieval past to which his text relates? How to see it now, as though face to*

face or present to us? These are, in one form or another, the questions Carlyle interweaves throughout as he invites the reader to participate in an at times almost magical and uncanny encounter with the past:

Readers who please to go along with us into this poor *Jocelini Chronica* shall wander inconveniently enough, as in wintry twilight, through some poor stript hazel-grove, rustling with foolish noises, and perpetually hindering the eyesight; but across which, here and there, some real human figure is seen moving; very strange; whom we could hail if he would answer; - and we look into a pair of eyes deep as our own, *imaging* our own, but all unconscious of us; to whom we for the time are become as spirits and invisible! (*Past and Present*, II.ii.53)²².

This exposure in the text of the active generation of a complexity of relationships between the past and the present, is tantamount to a refutation of the mechanical model of a linear historical narration involving an atomised categorisation of events and people that violates reality and our intimate relationship with nature. *Sartor Resartus*, *Past and Present*, and *The French Revolution* - along with so many other works by Carlyle that similarly expose the author's agency and demand the reader's active participation in the agency involved in remembering or representing the past through the present - constitute the embodiment of a philosophical standpoint, and aesthetic that rages against and subverts the mechanical metaphor and its culpably simplistic conception of representation, of memory, and its gross *misrepresentation* of things, events, and the human condition.

Carlyle presents to the reader his narratorial problems of re-creating the dead past as a representative act that in turn demands the reader's participation in his own deep longing to recover the past and envision it anew as informed by and informing the present. In so performing as a writer, Carlyle is inviting his reader to commence a self-reformation fundamental to contesting the otherwise overwhelming might of the

22. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Chris R. Vanden Bossche, Joel Brattin, and D.J. Trela. Strouse Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

mechanical metaphor. Through his struggles with attempting to achieve a face to face reality that is *non-representative*, present, the performance of his *acts of memory* encourage a reading experience of the interwoven, overlapping of relatedness and the relative, conditional nature of our knowing of the past and of anything we represent in art – this is an organic, fluid, living incarnation in language that profoundly offers the reader (*and generates*) a major alternative to the mechanical metaphor. In many ways sowing the seeds of numerous artistic and literary works by others – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, several members of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, John Ruskin, William Morris, and many other artists and writers – Carlyle was providing a potent counter-cultural or counter-Enlightenment energy against the mechanical metaphor's representationist implications of a deep alienation from reality and from the past. But Carlyle and those who followed his lead, or who similarly participated in struggling against the perversity of subjugating humanity to the machine, were in effect involved in what perhaps now might best be thought of as a never-ending struggle of even greater urgency against representations of humanity that condemn people to an existence that is, in Hobbes's haunting words, 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.'

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