The Machine Age and Its Effect On the Literary Arts

Mr. O'Brien Undertakes to Gauge Its Impact On the Form and Quality of Our Writing

John Chamberlain

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DANCE OF THE MACHINES. By Edward J. O'Brien. 274 pp. New York: The Macauky Company. £2.50.

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

IT is a man-sized job that Edward J. O'Brien has attempted in his "Dance of the Machines," and if he has failed to carry it through with complete lucidity, with inevitable logic and with thorough satisfaction to all concerned, why, who is there among us to cast the first stone? What he has tried to do is to ascertain the effects of a machine civilization upon man as an artist, and the path he has chosen to walk is strewn with the pitfalls of the imponderable. He finds himself involved with all the eternal enigmas. All through his pages runs a quarrel between predestination and free will, for example, and who in the entire history of mankind has ever said a definite, unchallengeable word on that? His Molochs turn out to be John Calvin, Descartes, John Broadus Watson, Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, and he makes out an excellent case against them, but another person of equal intelligence might take these same figures and, by simple refusal to pursue their doctrines to the extreme and logical absurdity, demonstrate how useful they have been to mankind, and how they can help man in his capacity as artist. Other writers have done better with the basic matters which make up the first third of Mr. O'Brien's book. Stuart Chase, for example, has, with less hysteria, explored the relations of the machine to man. Count Keyserling has written more penetrating criticisms of America and behaviorism. Mr. O'Brien's notions of time values and space values, and the stress they receive in modern society, are more trenchantly set forth by Wyndham Lewis and Lewis Mumford. Eddington and Whitehead have disposed of pure Cartesianism, with its impulse to think of all things in terms of a rigidly determined sequence of cause and effect, to better advantage than Mr. O'Brien. And yet, when all these reservations have been made, it remains true that Mr. O'Brien has had the great courage to attempt to link many perplexing matters together, and to make plain the quarrel that exists between those who would pursue science at the expense of art, and those whose interest lies in the world of value, color, depth, intuition and quality that is the province of the artist. The fight narrows down to a quarrel between mechanism and dynamism, a battle between the free creative play of a mind endowed with freedom of choice, and the predestined movement of a mind that works as a machine works in a stereotyped groove. Mr. O'Brien admits that his attempts to get over the impasse of free will, which makes for good art, and predestination, which makes for stereotyped art, sound like a revival of theological battles that have long since been quite defunct. And yet there is a very real problem here. For, as he makes plain, the mind that considers itself a creative agency, with the ability to shape things as it desires, will naturally concern itself with the notion of quality. If such a mind belongs to a short-story writer (and Mr. O'Brien has the short story particularly at heart), it will strive to get subtlety, chiaroscuro, beauty of tone, insight and richness into the stories which it shapes. If, on the other hand, we

have to deal with a mind that considers itself a machine that is impotent to control its own destiny, we will find that this mind naturally turns to questions of quantity and measurement. This sort of mind will argue that, while it cannot shape the future, it can at least measure what exists and from this measurement deduce certain general laws.

How is the question of a machine civilization bound up with all this? It has a very real connection, if we are to believe Mr. O'Brien's argument. He makes the point that people living in constant contact with machines are apt to worship precision, to regard human effort with contempt because of the factor of error, and to admire the machine because it is infallible. The machine, he says, lays a "strong emphasis on the value of time" and will not "tolerate spaciousness in man." One has only to go to Henry Ford's pronouncement upon strong drink to see that Mr. O'Brien is right, for Mr. Ford condemns the "spaciousness" of loafing in a barroom because it takes time away from the building of automobiles. "Man," says Mr. O'Brien, "is valued no longer for what he is, but for what he can produce." It is in the mid-third of the book that Mr. O'Brien traces the effect of the machine upon the short story. The average American magazine, he says, is published for men whose interests are in production and number rather than in quality. Hence the short story that finds its way into this magazine is "impersonal." "It seldom creates character, because its readers are afraid of individuality and dislike it." "Like the machine, the American short story manufactures 'types,' and it is the recognition of these 'types' which appears to give pleasure to the reader." Courses in the short story resolve themselves into the study of texts abounding "in geometric diagrams of lines and curves and circles. The incompetent who cannot think in terms of criss-cross lines is eliminated." Such comment has long been the staple argument of the literary revolté and Mr. O'Brien is more valuable when he traces the effect of machine civilization upon these very rebels who pride themselves upon having escaped from the machine-made convention. He tells us something, apparently with authority, that we have not hitherto known of Ernest Hemingway. Waldo Frank surmised some time ago that Hemingway was Anderson with the mask of bravado clamped on, but we couldn't be sure. Mr. O'Brien makes us sure. At one time, he tells us, Hemingway approached life "with innocence of mind and innocence of eye, and with a religious faith in life which was generous and rightly quixotic. Some years ago, on the top or an Italian mountain, he told me some of his war experiences. He went into the war a pious boy. Then he witnessed the spiritual destructiveness of machinery. He is unable to perceive the purpose of this suffering." Nevertheless, Hemingway, like Sherwood Anderson, has a vision that "has preserved its faith in human nature while never shirking the implications of what it sees." It is Mr. O'Brien's conclusion that "the machine has robbed our two finest story-writers (Hemingway and Anderson) of a religious faith, a general philosophy, and a principle of unity." And, he goes on, if our two best men are moved so deeply by a sense of loss, what of all the other people in America who perceive the loss more dimly? There occurs the suspicion that Mr. O'Brien's aspersions on the machine are somewhat misplaced, that he isn't putting the

emphasis in the right spot. For the machine is, after all, an end product. It developed logically from the belief of the seventeenth century that man, through science (which is measurement), could proceed to a revelation of a meaning in existence. The machine can do no irreparable harm to the human spirit if we cease to accord it the sort of reverence that man of old reserved for nature, or for his god, and the problem at hand is to bring people to a realization that cogs and subways and motor cars are merely lackeys and not the incarnation of master spirits. In "The Future of the Novel" (which might just as well read "The Future of the Short Story") John Carruthers sets down a platitude that our artists have all but forgotten, that good art and bad narrows down to a question of "imaginative attitude toward the world." One can either stress the world of machines, with its regularity, or the world of human emotions and needs and functions, which are irregular and hence more difficult to talk about. Put the accent on the first and we are on our way to the hive; put it on the second and we are on our way to a society with room for free creative play. It is the virtue of scientists like Eddington that they have turned and subordinated their old god of measurement to the more important question of human happiness. If the defection of such as Eddington helps to decrease man's respect for the machine, if it helps us to regard Henry Ford as a remarkable servant instead of as a remarkable messiah, it might not, to filch a quotation from Bertrand Russell, be a bad thing. Incidentally. Mr. O'Brien says he is preparing two more books, one an analysis of "mechanistic structure," and the other a proposal of means by which we may gain control of the machine. It may be unfair to quarrel with him on the basis of his first book, for it is evident that he has other cards up his sleeve.

A Photograph From "Das Deutsche Lichtbild, 1928–1929." (Verlag Robert & Bruno Schultz)

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