

Tamara Ketabgian. *The Lives of Machines: The Industrial Imaginary in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-472-07140-1. Price: US\$80.00.

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We have never been human. Or at least, not recently. Tamara Ketabgian's *The Lives of Machines: The Industrial Imaginary in Victorian Literature and Culture* is a wonderful explication of the nineteenth-century origins of all the weird contradictions our figures of speech twist into as they concern the mechanical. We do not want to function like robots, but we do want to work like well-oiled machines; we do not want to glide through our days on automatic pilot but we do wish our efforts were characterized by engineered precision; our feelings ought not to be mechanical, but we are expected to regulate them. That is, we want to be the right kind of machine functioning in just the right way. In this, we are, as always, the other Victorians, except that the Victorians seem to have had a more complex understanding of the ways in which we humans are deeply mechanical, hydraulic and manageable, and the ways in which machines are deeply emotive, animal, and unpredictable. If we give up the binary, perhaps more beloved to postmodern subjects than to our Victorian forebears, of deep humans and soulless machines, Ketabgian amply and subtly demonstrates, we find in the cyborg of the nineteenth century nothing less (or more) than ourselves.

In the factory humans and machines were, of course, joined in the most intimate ways and the machine deeply affected the human mechanism, changing its very substance or mode of operation (including the fact that we see it as, in part, a *mechanism*). Nineteenth-century language is already post-human, and the possibilities for porous human/non-human boundaries abound. “Subjectivity becomes for Marx,” Ketabgian strikingly argues, “a collection of prosthetic forces rather than a fixed material entity” (28). Ketabgian expands this argument about non-individuated subjects to writers who seem far less likely to consider such possibilities than Marx: Harriet Martineau and other spiritualists, for example, used industrial metaphors to examine the bounds of the individual and the possibilities of spiritual fusion: “It is by joining with other forces and systems that we may perfect the self and its faculties,” their thinking suggests (43). The liberal individual of the nineteenth century—a subject who increasingly seems like one option among many in the period—is joined, literally, to a host of forces, prostheses, and possibilities in Ketabgian’s riveting readings of the lives of machines, other apparently non-sentient beings, and the human/non-human networks of nineteenth-century cyborgs.

For writers like Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle, this fusion of human and machine is, at one level, a matter of horror: in *Hard Times* (1854) and “Signs of the Times” (1829) these writers famously abhor the loss of humanity that factory work seems to cause. But in Ketabgian’s counterintuitive and deft readings, both writers raise a host of questions about humanity and machinery. Carlyle famously grouses that “Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand.” Ketabgian comments: “Although this claim first seems to lament a waning of affect, it ultimately does not portray the erasure of feeling so much as the presence of different and more mechanical

forms of feeling” (52). In the first third of the century the question becomes, what part of the human being *is* mechanical in some nearly literal way. The early physiologic psychologists—Marshall Hall, Thomas Laycock, and William Benjamin Carpenter—studied reflexes, using mechanical analogies for activity that occurred “independently of mind and will” (53). This mechanistic idea of a crucial aspect of human behavior is related to the sense, in Dickens’s writings on machines and elephants (and on machines as elephants), that the interiority of the human and the animal, like that of the machine, may be unpredictable: mechanical regularity may give way to mechanical violence, as a rational human or a seemingly tame animal may suddenly react violently due to a reflex that is not governed by any higher being than the machine that is the nervous system.

Indeed, the entire system of modernity becomes very nervous—in the sense of reflexive, interactive, and easily stimulated—in Ketabgian’s subtle reading of its neuromuscular symptoms. Regulated, regular work produces regular appetites, which might initially sound like a good thing, but steady work is one thing; steady drinking obviously quite another. Workers come to rely on regular wages, in the arguments of their middle-class friends and foes, and develop correspondingly regular appetites for food, drink, drugs and dress. “[I]ndustrial work so intensifies habits of consumption that they resemble mechanical processes themselves, as repetitive and biologically instinctive drives gone awry”(73). In this chapter on “brute appetite,” Ketabgian tries to redeem the habits of laboring-class consumption as they are represented by middle-class fictional and documentary reporters like Elizabeth Gaskell and Peter Gaskell. In a sensitive reading of *Mary Barton* (1848), Ketabgian imagines Elizabeth Gaskell’s desire to recuperate working-class consumer desire as “paradoxically redemptive”: *Mary Barton* recasts

“improvident appetite as an expression of nonverbal longing” (103). A disease of desire is also the basis for affiliation, ritual and the symbolism that makes communities—including that imagined one between the middle and laboring classes.

To write *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), George Eliot “enter[s] the boiler,” as Michel Serres has written of J.M.W. Turner in relation to his paintings of ships, water and steam, “figuratively dissecting and reproducing its constituent elements through repeated processes of energy conversion”(110). Steam power retains the natural force of water and the flood that ends this novel--taking massive hunks of machinery along with it, as well as the stormy, explosive, inundated feelings of Maggie--suggests the ways in which mechanical forces are not only like organic forces, but also composed of them. Such forces therefore contain within them the uncontrollable force of natural energy. Our ability to harness such forces (with “harnessing” being one of many animal metaphors for mechanical power) is limited; and even though we can control steam power, we cannot control water power altogether. *The Mill on the Floss*, in Ketabgian’s reading, is a very specific kind of meditation on Victorian physics: it suggests the extent to which energy was regarded as superhuman and mutable—a way of thinking we might profitably adopt.

The final chapter, on the piano, is an unexpected delight. Here, all the strands of this complex argument come together in the ultimate marker of bourgeois arrival: the loud/soft machine that required artistry, sensitivity but also a highly a “near-automatic technical skill” (148). Indeed, the two cannot be separated. The human interior, in the imagination of the nineteenth-century virtuoso, is a “site of powerful industrial tensions and sympathies, best controlled and excited by technique” (157). The metronome, the

scales, “evenness and regularity,” contain conflict and allow for a safe and balanced distribution of force (157).

The Lives of Machines ends with Sigmund Freud’s hydraulic model of subjectivity, placing him in a genealogy of the machining of the modern self. Ketabgian concludes by decisively breaking with a model in which industrialization causes alienation and in which the human is the opposite of the machine. We are asked, at the end of this book, “to recognize ourselves in and as machines” (168). The evidence for doing so is compellingly presented throughout the book. I would like Ketabgian to now write another book (not this second, but soon) about the distinction between humans and machines and the apparently humane work of that distinction. Obviously, it has done very little good in the past or in the present. If we acknowledge our machine-ness, will we value ourselves and other humans more readily given that we are all a kind of capital investment in that existential state rather than disposable labor? Might it make more sense in industrial- and in late-capitalism, to be the things—the machines, the cyborgs, the prostheticized beings that we are—more explicitly, so that we might survive more readily? When I say “we,” I don’t mean myself—I am surviving very nicely. I mean the waves of laborers who, like the waves of migrants arriving in England and Scotland in the nineteenth century, are entirely disposable for present industrial purposes. They are not seen as machines; they are regarded, as far as I can tell, as deeply and merely human. Perhaps if the rhetoric about humanity would go away, their value in world markets; they might be worth protecting, or paying decently. Perhaps as machines they would be.

Biographical Notice:

Elaine Freedgood, a professor of English at NYU, is the author of *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge 2000) and *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago 2006) and editor of *Factory Production in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford 2003).