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The English Nineteenth-Century Novel
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“The phrase ‘getting on’ became established usage in the 1840s. It meant making a success of one’s life, building a career, finding a place in the mainstream of society, often from beginnings that were disadvantaged or isolated” (Rick Rylance). Examine the figure of the “self-made man” in two or more novels.

For much of the 19th Century, the transformative effects of the Industrial Revolution were still being keenly felt by Victorian society. The British social consciousness had been dramatically re-structured by the systematic shift away from the economic inheritance and governance of the upper-middle classes and towards a capitalist modernity in which – in theory – it was possible for any man to earn a place in the Victorian bourgeoisie through financial gain. The literary figure of the ‘self-made man’ became increasingly prevalent in popular literature during this period, with characters such as *Wuthering Heights*’ Heathcliff or Frederick Wentworth in Austen’s *Persuasion* capturing the public imagination. But these new ‘self-made’ protagonists did not just reflect support for the rapidly-modernising era. Rather, they functioned in part as a tool by which the advantages and limitations of the new capitalist system could be navigated. When the self-made man character was successful in his endeavours, then the readership were able to measure the respective successes of the new method of societal organisation. When the character failed, the flaws of modern society were accordingly called into question. The relationship between the reader and the character was therefore one which served a purpose outside of the confines of the text; it aided an understanding of the changes that were occurring as a result of the effects of Industrialism.

Despite being written twenty years apart, the self-made male protagonists of Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) both function as a means of interrogating aspects of modern society within their respective texts: while John Thornton represents the difficulties faced by a new class of Industrial entrepreneurs, Augustus Melmotte embodies the problematic rise of speculative capitalism in the latter half of the 19th Century. Neither character can be described as a ‘successful’ self-made man, and both face problems which derail their financial and personal achievements, their failures emphasising the societal faults which prevent their progress. Through an investigation into what it means to be ‘self-made’ in Victorian fiction, then an examination of Thornton and Melmotte’s relationship to the central pillars of ‘self-making,’ profit and education, and finally in a comparison between some of the successful and unsuccessful self-made men in each text, this essay will demonstrate how both texts use the archetype of the self-made man to expose and measure the defects in the new system of capitalist modernity.

It is firstly important to consider how the archetype of the self-made man could be used by Victorian readers as a device by which the developing landscape of British modernisation could be engaged with. The answer to this can be found in Thomas Carlyle’s influential 1829 work *Sign of the Times* in which he points out that, “To reform a world, to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake; and all but foolish men know, that the only solid, though a far slower reformation, is what each begins and perfects on himself,” (Carlyle, 85). Here, the responsibility for maintaining the system through constant reform is placed on the individual who, Carlyle argues, will remain “solid” in a rapidly-changing and fluid era. As a figure characterised by his constancy and determination, the literary figure of the self-made man thus became an icon by which the responsibility for testing out the efficacy of modern capitalism could be displaced by readers, allowing for a safe and comfortable exploration of the system’s advantages and problems within the body of the text. However, both *North and South* and *The Way We Live Now* problematize this dichotomous way of thinking, instead proposing that it is society as a whole, rather than the individual, who is responsible for the positive development of the capitalist system. By fictionalizing the individual/nation dichotomy as the relationship between the ‘self-made man’ and ‘society’ – society defined here as the upper-middle class Victorian bourgeoisie who came from established families – both texts prove that this juxtaposed way of engaging with society is insufficient. Rather, the novels suggest, ‘society’ is responsible for the creation of the self-made man, and thus responsible also for his successes and failures.

In *North and South* the self-made man, Thornton, is placed in opposition to the characters who represent ‘society’ – specifically, the Hale family – and is used by them as a tool with which they can understand their entrance into a new industrial town, in much the same way as Victorian society used the self-made man image to navigate the modern world. This can be seen in the way that the initial description of Thornton’s ‘self-made’ history is mediated through several layers of narrative: first through Mr. Bell, then through Mr. Hale, before being re-told to Margaret and, by extension, the reader. Mr. Hale’s own account of Thornton’s past is riddled with verbs which indicate his subjectivity in his role as a narrator; “I fancy,” “I believe,” and “I knew,” (Gaskell, 87). Hale’s re-telling of the story, then, is indicated to be not an unbiased account, but one compromised by his own personal judgements. Similarly, his frequent repetition of, “Mr. Bell says,” (87) in this passage emphasises the fact that Thornton is unable to relate his own history; instead, his story is being re-told by those who wish to tell it in order to make an example of him, regardless of the objective ‘truth.’ In this extract, Thornton is proved to be the archetype of a good self-made man: diligent, moralistic and – crucially – successful in his endeavours. But, if Mr. Hale is read here as the voice of society then the way in which he constructs Thornton through his own narrative can be seen as representing the ways in which society ‘creates’ the self-made man icon for its own requirements. As a dissenting member of the clergy Mr. Hale is himself ‘outside’ of society’s establishments, forced into suddenly entering a modern system, and thus needs to construct his own version of the self-made man in Thornton in order to help him understand the boundaries of the age that he has joined. In denying Thornton his own voice to describe his past, the text demonstrates how the act of ‘self-making’ is not something undertaken by the individual, but by society.

A similar external construction of the self-made man can be seen in *The Way We Live Now*, in which Melmotte is positioned as being constructed by a society who require him to test the limits of achievement under speculative capitalism. Melmotte is assigned his ‘self-made’ character by the voice of the omniscient third-person narrator. Throughout the text the narrator can be read as acting as the ‘voice of society,’ weaving together the various stories of the Victorian establishment’s members and re-presenting them from an insider’s perspective. As with Thornton, then, Melmotte is demonstrated by the text’s narrative voice as a self-made outsider, who can be used by society to work out the boundaries of the modern age. As Thornton’s initial description is permeated by uncertainty, Melmotte’s first presentation is qualified by the language of rumour, supporting the idea that he is less of a self-made man than he is a societal construct of one. The repetition of “It was acknowledged,” (Trollope, 30) and “It was said,” (31) invokes an atmosphere of gossip surrounding the character’s presentation, and when this is juxtaposed with language of certainty – “It was at any rate an established fact that Mr Melmotte had made his wealth in France,” (31) – Melmotte’s true character becomes blurred and uncertain; he seems more of a collective imagining of a self-made man than a real one. Physically, he is described as filling the space: he is, “a large man […] with heavy eyebrows, and a wonderful look of power about his mouth and chin,” (31). This almost monstrous presentation of Melmotte’s appearance similarly seems to suggest that as much as he reflects society’s need to understand the rise of modern capitalism, he also partially embodies their fear of it; he fills the literary space and leaves little room for those struggling to keep up with his ceaseless profit. Melmotte, then, is a figure completely created by 19th Century society as an embodiment of the potentials of speculative capitalism – like Thornton, he is a ‘self-made man’ whose self is made for him.

While Carlyle proposes that the individual must be responsible for managing and testing the edges of Victorian modernity, the presentations of both Thornton and Melmotte in each text prove that the self-made man’s personal individuality is compromised by the fact that, in filling the literary archetype, he has become a creation of society. As Mr. Hale relies on his re-creation of Thornton to maintain his belief in a period of time that he is floundering in, the characters of *The Way We Live Now* need Melmotte to test the borders of what is possible under speculative capitalism, and are drawn to him for this reason. If the figure of the ‘self-made man,’ is thus conceived as a product in response to societal needs, then his successes within the literary landscape reflects the advantages of capitalist modernity and, by extension, his failures act in the same way. Therefore, if both Melmotte and Thornton are posed in their respective texts as mirrors of societal values, then each novel functions to demonstrate how their individual failings reflect a social critique of modern Victorian society.

In both *North and South* and *The Way We Live Now* the self-made man characters largely fail in their individual endeavours: Melmotte is exposed as a fraud while Thornton’s lack of business in industrial enterprise means that, by the end of the novel, he has been forced to cease production. If, as has been previously argued, it is the voice of ‘society’ which crucially establishes the icon of the self-made man then, the texts appear to suggest, the blame for these failures must be accordingly attributed to the flaws within modern capitalism which prevent the characters from being successful within their fictional landscapes. This argument can be supported through an exploration of how both Thornton and Melmotte engage with the two traditional bodies of ‘self-making’: money-making and the accumulation of financial wealth, and education and personal self-betterment. Arguable, the ideal self-made man in literature will participate equally in both of these institutions, making himself economically and morally, and thereby being allowed to enter society and join the ranks of people responsible for his creation. The first of these, money-making, is a concept at the heart of the ‘self-made man’ image, reflecting the belief that through ceaselessly increasing one’s own profits any man can enter the respected ranks of modern society. However, both Melmotte and Thornton ultimately fail as money-makers, and therefore cannot live up to their respective statuses as ‘self-made men.’ This failure to financially succeed in modern capitalism could be read as a criticism of the implicit focus on capital gain in 19th Century society, rather than on idealised moral ethics.

As a figure representing industrial endeavour, Thornton is largely characterised by his ‘self-made’ ideals of business and profit, with the intention – his “idea of merchant-life,” (Gaskell, 419) as he describes towards the end of the novel – of being accepted as a figurehead of emerging capitalist modernity. Although he rejects the “aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease,” (81) he recognises that his position will allow for him to eventually join the new upper-classes which, he believes, will lead the new system. This can be shown in his indirect comparison of himself to a bee, a typical Victorian symbol of industry, in contrast to the outdated pre-Industrial systems which are “clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly,” (81). In this way, the text demonstrates how, in being positioned as a self-made man by society, Thornton believes that his success in the new societal structure is assured. However, despite his determination to be economically successful, the novel insinuates that Thornton’s failure as a manufacturer at the end of the text is due to the financial self-interest that is encouraged by modern capitalism; in hiring cheap Irish labour instead of Milton workmen, he is forced to acknowledge that “much of their work was damaged and unfit to be sent forth by a house which prided itself on turning out nothing but first-rate articles,” (420) and, having alienated his workforce, is unable to survive the recession. Thornton’s failure here is a moral one: his refusal to engage with the concerns of his men leads, ultimately, to his own downfall. In this sense, the text seems to challenge what it perceives as a fundamental flaw in the capitalist system – that it benefits some, but does little in the way of aiding the less-wealthy populace. In the chapter that details Thornton’s economic collapse, *Changes at Milton*, Gaskell includes an excerpt from a nursery rhyme at the beginning of the chapter: “Here we go up, up, up; / And here we go down, down, downee!” (418), a reference which structurally poses Thornton’s rise and fall under capitalism as a child’s game, significantly unimportant in the wider moral context of the world. Although his morality shifts and develops as a result of his interactions with Margaret, Thornton still fails as a money-maker, and subsequently as a self-made man, and this failure can be read as reflecting an exposition of what the text poses as flaws within capitalist modernity.

*North and South* attacks the lack of morality implicit in capitalism as its biggest flaw, and similarly Melmotte is a character who exposes the ways in which the promises of speculative capitalism corrupts the moral fibre of society. As a self-made money-maker profiting off of speculation, Melmotte’s fraudulent activities and lack of moral scruples mean that, like Thornton, his accumulation of wealth is doomed to failure from the beginning of the text. However, whereas *North and South* poses capitalism as a financial system which corrupts the self-made individual, in *The Way We Live Now* Melmotte is perhaps treated more as the inevitable product of a society which increasingly values greed and profit. This is an argument supported by Frank Kermode’s analysis of Melmotte’s suicide, in which he argues that, “The foreign body is expelled; but there is some sense that Melmotte is a scapegoat as well as an intruder, a great man as well as a sordid villain,” (Kermode, xv). The narrator’s account of Melmotte’s suicide is perhaps more sympathetic than a reader might expect; his humanity is re-asserted through comparisons with other suicidal fictional archetypes, such as “the poor woman whose lover and lord had deserted her,” (Trollope, 672) and Melmotte himself is described varying as “a man,” (672), “a wretch,” (672) and a “poor creature,” (673). Juxtaposed with this sympathetic depiction of Melmotte’s death is a detached and alienated presentation of society’s reaction to the event – in which areas of London are personified – thereby setting up the image of the failed self-made individual against the continuing gossip of London society.

“In Westminster he was always odious […] Finsbury delighted for a while to talk of the Great Financier, and even Chelsea thought that he had been done to death by odious tongues. It was, however, Marylebone alone that spoke of a monument,” (Trollope, 673).

Melmotte’s failure to adequately participate in the modern institution of money-making means that his failure as a self-made man is absolute, and he is unable to survive the detriment to his self-construction. But unlike in *North and South*, in which the text blames Thornton alone for his moral and thus financial failings, *The Way We Live Now* invites a critique of the society which has created a scapegoat for its own greed and corruption. Melmotte is an unsuccessful money-maker at the end of the text, and therefore an unsuccessful self-made man, but he is partially shown to be a victim of the desires of the society that created him for unceasing capitalist gain at the expense of moral conduct.

It can be argued, then, that both texts criticise a perceived lack of morality as a result of the values of capitalist modernity, and so the avenue of institutionalised money-making as a means of developing the self-made man figure is similarly inherently rejected. Both texts thus pose the institution of education and self-betterment – the Victorian belief that through accumulation of knowledge and moral development any man could raise themselves in society – as an alternative method by which the ‘self-made man’ can be realised. Both Thornton and Melmotte engage in attempts at self-betterment in their respective narratives. However, as with their attempts at collecting profit, this also proves to be an insufficient method of self-making for each character since, for each character, personal education is less important than the amount of money they are able to make. Again, a criticism of modern Victorian society might be read into this failing to achieve the idealised image of the ‘self-made man,’ as both Thornton and Melmotte’s inability to properly ‘better’ themselves indicates that these attempts are taking place in a society that no longer values such self-improvement.

Thornton rejects the idea of the benefits of education and self-improvement very early on in *North and South*, expressing the belief that, although he is seeking a tutor in Mr. Hale, he does not consider is an important facet in the construction of himself as a self-made man; he comments, “But I ask you, what preparation were [Latin and Greek] for such a life as I had to lead? None at all. Utterly none at all,” (Gaskell, 85). In dichotomising education against what he calls ‘real life’ – the process of making money – Thornton places a greater importance on the latter, demonstrating a personal belief that in the modern capitalist world in which he is a figure there is little room for self-improvement through knowledge. As the text criticises too heavy a reliance on what it perceives as a flawed economic system, so too does it criticise Thornton’s eagerness to eschew what he derisively calls “all that old narration,” (85). As the novel progresses Thornton increasingly prioritises his business and profit over his sessions with Mr. Hale, and structurally this strand of the narrative runs parallel with his decreasing success in business, and therefore his decreasing success as a self-made man. However, the text does not blame Thornton entirely for his preference of monetary success over self-betterment. In Chapter 20, *Men and Gentlemen*, a minor character – Mrs. Slickson, the wife of another Milton manufacturer – comments of Thornton, “Does he really find time to read with a tutor, in the midst of all his business,– and this abominable strike in hand as well?” (165). In this exchange, the text emphasises money-making as the core value of the ‘Milton men,’ who represent the burgeoning Industrial middle-classes. Thus, as modern society damages the self-made individual by encouraging a total focus on capital gain, so too is it shown to be damaging by disrupting what the text seems to consider the more ‘moral’ aspect of self-making. In rejecting his education completely, Thornton becomes absolutely reliant on his financial prosperity in his desire to succeed as a self-made man, but in doing so sets himself up for failure in both spheres. Thus, the text seems to suggest, modern society is flawed in that it does not leave room for self-betterment in its ceaseless drive towards economic success.

*The Way We Live Now* is perhaps less eager to celebrate education and self-improvement as a means of entering society. In 1859, the reformist Samuel Smiles published his hugely popular and influential book *Self Help*, a doctrine which promoted dedication to self-awareness of the problems of urban living. Robert M. Polhemus argues that Trollope was wary of this populist approach to self-betterment, claiming in his work *The Changing World of Anthony Trollope* (1968) that:

“Trollope thought the doctrine of the times that one must at all costs better oneself could and would lead to pointless competition and social climbing. Rather bettering oneself means […] giving up egotistical pride and ambitions, asking little of the world, accepting one’s moral responsibilities to others, and learning to value integrity and freedom in oneself and others,” (Polhemus, 66).

If Melmotte is a character who disproves the need for education and ceaseless self-improvement to enter society, he is also one who rejects the values set out here – his only achievement is his ability to make money which, as aforementioned, means he becomes a scapegoat for society’s greed and corruption. Similarly, the levels of his success without any self-improvement or moral values could be seen to reflect society’s eagerness to use him to test the limits of the modern, speculative capitalist age which Melmotte in part represents. This can be seen in the narrator’s assertion that, “It seemed that there was but one virtue in the world, commercial enterprise – and that Melmotte was its prophet,” (Trollope, 337) a line which reflects a critique of what the text perceives as the replacement with virtue or personal improvement with commercialism in the contemporary times. Melmotte’s entry into Parliament is thus presented as society’s failure to discern between personal virtue and capital gain in a system that increasingly values the latter. Melmotte’s lack of education on entering Parliament is evident in his social ineptitude: he is unsure whether to take his hat off or not, is “ignorant of the forms of the house,” (530) and “hardly caught the meaning of a sentence that was said, nor did he try to,” (529) until the subject of business is addressed, at which point he is unable to articulate his points appropriately. Rather than attempting, through education and experience, to improve his own situation, he instead becomes “full of the lesson which he was now ever teaching himself,” (530). In this way, the text interweaves the notion of education – which Melmotte does not have – with that of societal virtue. The implicit criticism here is that, in its desire for a figure who represents the endless possibilities of commercialism, society has invited an uneducated and unvirtuous figure into its decision-making processes. Smiles’ assertion that, “The making of a fortune may no doubt enable some people to ‘enter society,’ as it is called; but to be esteemed there, they must profess qualities of mind, manners, or heart, else they are merely rich people, nothing more,” (Smiles, 301) is disproved: Melmotte is merely a ‘rich person,’ but one which society has wrongly embraced.

As society creates the self-made man, so too is society responsible for his failings. In *North and South* Thornton’s eventual collapse is shown to be the result of a lack of moral fraternity under modern capitalism, while Melmotte’s decline in *The Way We Live Now* is attributed to the ways in which society has been corrupted by the promises of ceaseless gain in a speculative system. In theory, Thornton and Melmotte have been created to suit a societal purpose of navigating a new national order; in practise, they are unable to live up to this role, and rather than blaming the individual for this the two texts point to problems within post-Industrial methods of structuring civilisation as the cause of this inadequacy. In both the money-making and educative spheres, Melmotte and Thornton demonstrate the limits of self-making in 19th Century modern society.

So far, this essay has worked to demonstrate how both Gaskell and Trollope’s presentations of the ‘self-made man’ can be interpreted as a method of societal critique, focusing on an analysis of how and why Victorian society created the ‘self-made man’ icon, and then establishing how the flaws implicit in the new capitalist system function not just to destroy this icon, but to destroy the individual man as well. This argument is perhaps complicated by the fact that Melmotte and Thornton are not the only self-made men in each text – although they are certainly the most prominent – and that the other examples given are significantly more successful. In *North and South* the figure of Henry Lennox is posed against Thornton both as a romantic rival and as a point of comparison in self-making; in *The Way We Live Now* John Crumb is Melmotte’s direct opposite, a labouring farmer dichotomised with the colossus of speculative capitalism. Both of these character achieve largely positive outcomes to their aims, and neither are exposed as failures in the societal construction of the self-made man. However, it could instead be argued that rather in offering alternative, positive depictions of self-made men, the two texts are not arguing for a more conservative, individualistic societal critique, but instead are imagining the possibilities for self-made men within a system that supports, rather than undermines, their space in society.

The character of Henry Lennox in *North and South* can be read as almost an opposing double of Thornton. Both compete, indirectly, for Margaret’s love, and both can be broadly defined as ‘self-made’ men. Lennox’s self-making, however, is not industrial, but in law: he describes his “twenty years hard study,” (Gaskell, 28) to Margaret early on in the text, posing himself as a man who, like Thornton, has worked hard to earn and maintain his position. However, where Thornton is ‘created’ as a self-made man through the words of those around him, Lennox is not – instead he is described by the narrator, a largely non-judgemental voice which does not necessarily reflect societal values in the same way that the characters do. In the initial description of Lennox, the narrator notes how, “He was close by his handsome brother; he was the plain one in a singularly good-looking family; but his face was intelligent, keen and mobile,” (14). Lennox’s primary defining characteristic here is his relationship to his brother and to the rest of his family; he is thus is identified as part of a unit. In this way, the text indicates that Lennox’s view of himself as self-made is perhaps misguided. As a member of a familial group, he perhaps more closely resembles not the modern Industrial self-making that Thornton undertakes, but a more old-fashioned figure who attains a societal position through inheritance, and works only to maintain this position. Lennox, then, is not created by society as an image of a ‘self-made man’ in the same way that Thornton is, and neither is he therefore made responsible for any faults within modern society. Rather, as in the novel he is only able to watch Margaret and never attain her, he reflects an image of a type of ‘manhood’ that cannot be carried forward into capitalist modernity.

Unlike Lennox, Trollope’s second-most self-made man figure, John Crumb, is positioned completely outside of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Where Melmotte struggles to enter a class that he is eventually shunned from, John Crumb is content to remain within the boundaries of his own social set, thereby implicitly rejecting the corruptive influence of capitalism that the text exposes. Instead, he is set up as an indirect foil to Melmotte: an ideal image of the self-made man as opposed to the tainted one. Thus, the text points towards an example of an ideal ‘self-made’ figure – morally sound, hardworking and determined without being over-ambitious – who could act as a future model for the self-made man in a modern society free from its own internal flaws. When John Crumb is first described to the reader it is in the language of strength and honesty, unlike the flimsy rumour that characterises Melmotte. He is referred to as a “sturdy, honest fellow […] the very soul of industry at his work,” (Trollope, 144) a line in which John Crumb’s physical vigour is paralleled with both his moral attributes and his Christian spirit. His secondary defining characteristic is what the narrator describes as, “dusty. The meal had so gotten within his hair, and skin, and raiment, that it never came out altogether,” (144). Whereas Melmotte’s initial description paints him as being more aligned with society’s gossip about him than he is with any personal sense of selfhood, John Crumb’s labour and his ‘self’ is instantly visible on him. He is not a societal construction doomed to failure but a real man marked by the work that he does. John Crumb is therefore depicted as the text’s ideal of a self-made man as opposed to the inadequate version that society has constructed in Melmotte, and his personal successes in marrying Ruby demonstrate the novel’s view that, in a system in which greed is replaced by morality and determination, the self-made man icon still has potential for success.

Through the respective successes of Lennox and John Crumb, the two novels expand their respective societal criticisms by posing potential alternatives. *North and South* looks towards the past for comparison, comparing the industrial modern failures of Thornton to the easy bourgeois successes of Lennox, and deeming Thornton the more suitable figure to carry the protagonist, Margaret, into the future. In *The Way We Live Now* Trollope looks ahead and, in the “stout ghost,” (Trollope, 144) of John Crumb, imagines a premonition of a future society in which, the text hopes, the self-made man can be successful and free from society’s internal faults. But neither of these figures are representative of the contemporary present in the way that Thornton or Melmotte are, and neither have a similar impact on the narrative. The two text’s societal critiques, then, are still present in the icons of the ‘self-made man’ that Thornton and Melmotte embody.

Neither *North and South* nor *The Way We Live Now* is completely opposed to the benefits of adopting the self-made man as a literary device which can be used to map the new, post-Industrial world; a figure who can measure and explore the possibilities and limitations of capitalist modernity within the safe confines of the literary narrative. Both Thornton and Melmotte work in this way within their respective landscapes, demonstrating both the potential for social and economic gain in the contemporary times, as well as the risk of failure. But though neither text rejects the importance of the self-made man figure, both acknowledge that the image is just that – an icon which is created by society has society’s ever-developing ideals and priorities imprinted on it – and so in a century which increasingly values greed and ambition, as both novels argue the 19th Century does, it is an image which can be corrupted. Thornton and Melmotte fail as self-made men not as individuals, but as reflections of a society which is inherently flawed. This is not to suggest that either novel is necessarily a conservative text, looking back to pre-Industrialism for an imagined moral ideal: Gaskell rejects romantic views of the South and the pre-capitalism class ideals it represents, and Trollope leaves Roger Carbury alone as a dying relic of class inheritance values. Instead, both novels understand the complicated relationship between a rapidly modernising world system and the society that occupies it. Both novels strive towards a new age in which the self-made man can develop unimpeded, free from the moral corruption of Trollope’s world and free from the inequality of Gaskell’s, and carry the rest of society forward with him.

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