

Luddism in "Under the Rose"

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Manipulating the familiar progress/reaction model of the historical romance, Pynchon in "Under the Rose" (1961) studies the evolution of a human, individualistic society into a new, industrial, mechanical, collective society. His tale of intrigue, anchored historically in the Fashoda crisis of 1898, demonstrates that Luddism—a *rational* apprehension of the machine—may be an appropriate response to the industrialized, mechanized "machine" which has infiltrated the social and political spheres.

Pynchon addresses this proposition directly in his essay "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" (1984). Responding to C. P. Snow's 1959 Rede lecture, "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," Pynchon challenges Snow's thesis that of the two cultures—scientific and non-scientific (Pynchon calls the latter the "literary" culture)—the non-scientific class has "never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the Industrial Revolution"—that the non-scientific caste is a class of "'natural Luddites'" (Luddite 40). This decidedly unflattering designation, as Snow uses the term, Pynchon shows to be neither specifically applicable nor markedly undesirable. In Pynchon's eyes, it is O.K. to be a Luddite, and he readily applies the term to himself.

Snow's use of the term Luddite, Pynchon asserts, is "clearly polemical, wishing to imply an irrational fear and hatred of science and technology" (40). To Snow the Luddites represented the non-scientific class of intellectuals who could not understand the industrial revolution and, in their ignorance and fear, attempted to quell the rising machine age. Pynchon, however, refutes Snow: "Public feeling about the machines could never have been simple unreasoning horror, but likely something more complex: the love/hate that grows up between humans and machinery—especially when it's been around for a while" (40). For Pynchon, the Luddite is not driven by an irrational fear or an unexplainable need for aggression; rather, the Luddite is driven by an essentially reactionary response to an evolving society whose end is nested in ambiguity. This reactionary spirit Pynchon defines as an "unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however 'irrational,' to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it [is] doing" (41).

In the world of the historical romance, what better backdrop for a tale of Luddite sensibilities and a looming apocalypse than what Molly Hite calls “a point of historical discontinuity” (159), or, in Pynchon’s own words, “an accelerated passage in a long evolution” (40). At such a point of historical change, a Luddite would be most willing to remain faithful to the old order, unable to penetrate the menacing ambiguity of the future. In “Is It O.K. to be a Luddite?” Pynchon examines the Industrial Revolution; in “Under the Rose” he examines the Fashoda Crisis and the impending apocalypse of the First World War. In both the results are the same, for with the rise of the machine and the advent of group enterprise have come the demystification of humanity and the demise of individual import, coupled with a consolidation of power and control.

Luddite strains infiltrate Pynchon’s work from the beginning. In “The Small Rain” Pynchon introduces the “closed circuit” motif in which everyone is “‘on the same frequency’” (42). The National Guard operation in that story is internally disorderly “[d]espite its machine-like efficiency” (44). In “Entropy” the entropic effect, the allusions to Henry Adams’s *Dynamo*, the descent “‘from differentiation to sameness’” (88), the reference to “‘dehumanized amoral scientist type[s]’” (90), and the reappearance of the “closed circuit” motif all point toward the clash of the forces of progress and reaction which underlies the Luddite’s *rational* apprehension. Not until “Under the Rose,” however, is the Luddite question explored in detail. In this story Porpentine attempts to remain faithful to the old order while the world around him rushes toward, and into, the machine age. Porpentine loses his life, and the old order fades into farcical insignificance as the impotent Goodfellow attempts to avert the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand.

“Under the Rose” is informed by a carefully constructed series of oppositions which all betray the romantic irony inherent in the struggle between the English and German spies. These oppositions—explicit and implicit—divide along the lines of progress and reaction:

The Forces of Progress

Moldweorp
The New Order
The Dynamo
Chaos
The Collective
Electric Purity
The Machine

The Forces of Reaction

Porpentine
The Old Order
The Virgin
Order
The Individual
Respect for Humanity
The Human

The conflict between Porpentine and Goodfellow on one side—the forces of reaction—and Moldweorp’s aggregation of German spies on the other—the forces of progress—takes the form of a great game. That game has been raging for well over a decade: “For nearly fifteen years [Porpentine had] fled their sympathy” (102); but Porpentine recognizes that it is swiftly approaching some form of climax, just as once before “he had come . . . to face the already aged face of Moldweorp himself, the prizeman or maestro” (102–03). The prospect of this climax does not arouse great fear in Porpentine, for, even if the younger generation of spies only loosely—and occasionally not at all—conforms to the decorum adhered to by the old order, certainly his chief opponent, Moldweorp—so Porpentine thinks—will continue to conduct matters on a “gentlemanly basis.” Porpentine rests assured that “[t]hey would continue to use so fortunate an engine: would never seek his life, violate The Rules, forbear what had become for them pleasure” (103).

This reference to “The Rules” and the foreshadowing of Porpentine’s fate begin the weaving of Luddite motifs into the text. Porpentine’s faith in the rules—in the old order—prevents acute anxiety about his fate. His faith, however, is undercut in two ways: first, by the evidence that the younger generation of spies—Lepsius, Bongo-Shaftsbury, and Goodfellow as well—does not adhere to the code of decorum so important to the old order; second, by the hints throughout—realized in the end—that Moldweorp himself may have abandoned the old ways. The earliest evidence of a new order of espionage involves Moldweorp’s agents. Whereas one element of Porpentine’s strategy is to go about his business in the open, assuming a role of gentlemanly innocence in public, other agents mock this strategy through mimicry: “Porpentine once having fashioned such proper innocence, any use of it by others—especially Moldweorp’s agents—involved some violation of patent right. They would pirate if they could his child’s gaze, his plump angel’s smile” (102). In this world of deception and intrigue, to steal another spy’s methods is to break the accepted rules of espionage.

Porpentine is not ignorant of these subtle changes in the rules. Rather, he is well aware that the world has been changing during his fifteen years of playing hare and hounds:

An alignment like this, he felt, could only have taken place in a Western World where spying was becoming less an individual than a group enterprise, where the events of 1848 and the activities of anarchists and radicals all over the Continent seemed to proclaim that history was being made no longer through the *virtù* of single princes but rather by man in the

mass; by trends and tendencies and impersonal curves on a lattice of pale blue lines. (107)

Yet, in spite of this recognition, Porpentine retains faith in the rules of the game he has been playing for so long, still contending that the climax will depend on single, individual, combat between himself and Moldweorp: an old order duello. Porpentine believes he and Moldweorp are “comrade Machiavellians, still playing the games of Renaissance Italian politics in a world that had outgrown them” (107).

This belief turns out to be mistaken. While the game does, as Porpentine anticipates, rush to a climax, Porpentine discovers—too late—that the rules of the game have changed: his foe is no longer Moldweorp, but an aggregation of spies. Humanity, honor and decorum have fallen victim to the power of the new espionage machine:

Unlike Constantine on the verge of battle, [Porpentine] could not afford, this late, to be converted at any sign. Only curse himself, silent, for wanting so to believe in a fight according to the duello, even in this period of history. But they—no, it—had not been playing those rules. Only statistical odds. When had he stopped facing an adversary and taken on a Force, a Quantity? (134-35)

The forces of progress have spawned groups—impersonal energies, quantities—instead of individuals. The Rules have changed. Porpentine would have done well to maintain a certain rational apprehension toward his arch-foe.

The German agents represent a new order which embraces the machine and technology. They valorize power, electricity and purity. They forsake the individual and traditional notions of humanity. Bongo-Shaftsbury first appears as a grotesque half-man/half-bird (114). He has also wired himself, imbedding an electric switch in his arm, claiming, “‘Everything works by electricity. . . . And it is simple, and clean’” (121). The image of electric purity is a recurring motif in Pynchon’s works, usually representing some form of malignancy: “In Pynchon, evil is invariably a *puritanical* force, its images Arctic cold, scouring bleach, cleansing fire, pure electricity” (Fowler 36). Bongo-Shaftsbury has transformed himself into a machine which runs on electricity, clean, simple, free of emotion and the restrictions of decorum. His “switch is the very badge of his inhumanity: as a spy he aspires to be the perfect machine” (Coward 71). The new humanity, Bongo-Shaftsbury suggests to the child Mildred, is analogous to a mechanical doll: “‘Such lovely dolls, and clockwork inside. Dolls that

do everything perfectly, because of the machinery. Not like real little boys and girls at all. Real children cry, and act sullen, and won't behave. These dolls are much nicer'" (120). With this, he pushes up his shirt-sleeve to reveal the switch sewn into his arm, a grotesque image which frightens Mildred. Porpentine attempts to reprimand Bongo-Shaftsbury, clinging to the rules of decorum: "'One doesn't frighten a child, sir'" (121). But Bongo-Shaftsbury, unremorseful, knows he is bucking the old order: "'General principles. Damn you'" (122), he replies. The new humanity, the industrial society, merely damns the old order; it does not change.

Lepsius's role is slightly less dramatic than Bongo-Shaftsbury's, but conveys the advent of the new order just the same. Anticipating the demise of decorum, Lepsius longs for the purity and cleanliness of the remoter Nile:

"Doesn't the law of the wild beast prevail down there?" Lepsius said. "There are no property rights, only fighting; and the victor wins all. Glory, life, power and property, all."

"Perhaps," Goodfellow said. "But in Europe, you know, we are civilized. Fortunately. Jungle-law is inadmissible." . . .

"What a queer gentleman," Victoria said.

"Is it queer," Bongo-Shaftsbury said, deliberately reckless, "to favor the clean over the impure?" (117)

Later—after Lepsius has violated decorum by "cuff[ing an Arab] across the head" (123)—Porpentine considers the events that have been occurring around him, particularly among the local contingent of agents: "So. What did they call clean, then? Not observing The Rules, surely. If so they had reversed course. They'd never played so foul before. Could it mean that this meeting at Fashoda would be important: might even be The One? He opened his eyes to watch Bongo-Shaftsbury, engrossed in a book: Sidney J. Webb's *Industrial Democracy*" (123).

Moldweorp is a disciple of the new order so committed that he attempts to deny humanity in his pursuit of "purity" and "cleanliness." He would not only transform himself into a man of the new order, but transform all of Europe, aspiring to spread the technological revolution to all its many corners, hoping "Armageddon would sweep the house of Europe" (117). This great cleansing requires the execution of the old order and the embracing of the electric purity of the machine age. Moldweorp is driven by an intense desire to remain pure and clean: "A street walker was propositioning Moldweorp. [Porpentine] could not hear the conversation, only see a slow and unkind fury recast his

features to a wrath-mask; only watch him raise his cane and begin to slash methodically at the girl until she lay ragged at his feet" (117). The prostitute tells Porpentine that Moldweorp had called her "filth" (117). As a result, Porpentine is forced into a certain awareness: "Porpentine had tried to forget the incident. Not because it was ugly but because it showed his terrible flaw so clear: reminding him it was not Moldweorp he hated so much as a perverse idea of what is clean; not the girl he sympathized with so much as her humanity" (117-18). In the end, despite his earlier confidence that Moldweorp would remain true to the duello, Porpentine realizes that Moldweorp has become another cog in the wheel of progress: "It was no longer single combat. Had it ever been? Lepsius, Bongo-Shaftsbury, all the others, had been more than merely tools or physical extensions of Moldweorp. They were all in it; all had a stake, acted as a unit. Under orders. Whose orders? Anything human?" (134).

As the game draws to a finish, chaos erupts—the crisis at Fashoda, Goodfellow's negligence, Porpentine's confusion about his own loyalties and objectives. For Porpentine, the game has become muddled, confused. The crucial moment comes in the opera house when Porpentine fires at either Bongo-Shaftsbury or Lord Cromer. The ambiguity in his action betrays his inability to reconcile, or perhaps distinguish, the forces of progress and reaction. Having fired the shot, Porpentine turns to confront his arch rival and comrade Machiavellian. Moldweorp warns Porpentine that he is outnumbered: the situation is too critical, too important for Germany; additional agents have been brought in to help provoke tensions at Fashoda. "Porpentine looked back, exasperated. 'Go away,' he yelled, 'go away and die.' And was certain only in a dim way that the interchange of words had now, at last, been decisive" (134). With this show of emotion, of hatred for Moldweorp, Porpentine seals his fate. He knows that to show emotion is not only to break a rule of the game but to violate sound strategy as well:

like a Yorkshire sunset, certain things could not be afforded. Porpentine had realized this as a fledgling. You do not feel pity for the men you have to kill or the people you have to hurt. You do not feel any more than a vague *esprit de corps* toward the agents you are working with. Above all, you do not fall in love. Not if you want to succeed in espionage. (113)

Until the moment he yells at Moldweorp, "Porpentine had remained true to that code" (113). But with his show of emotion, a human response, he violates the decorum so cherished by the old order. To the German agents, however, Porpentine's error is more serious: the

exhibition of a patently human emotion cannot be excused by the new order of espionage. As David Cowart notes, "Porpentine's is a human gesture, hence impure" (70). Human emotion is unclean; a machine displays no feelings. In the new humanity, emotional attachments have been discarded.

The victory of the German agents over Porpentine has particular Luddite significance because it represents the tip of the historical scales from the age of humanity to the age of the machine. As Cowart points out, the endgame represents "the transformation in the world view from the dominance of the human to that of the inanimate" (27). The shift is symbolically represented through Bongo-Shaftsbury: "Bongo-Shaftsbury pushed up his shirt-cuff, opened the switch and closed it the other way" (136). Following this throw of the switch, Porpentine realizes that the endgame will resolve into, not a duello, but combat against a conglomeration. Bongo-Shaftsbury asks, sarcastically, "'This is between you and the Chief, is it not?' Ho, ho, thought Porpentine: couldn't it have been?" (136).

The preservation of Lord Cromer is a hollow victory for the English spies. The German spies achieve a goal of greater duration and historical importance: Porpentine, representative of the old order, is eliminated from the playing field. In the desert, Porpentine finally realizes that he and Moldweorp have been playing by different rules, an error he will not live to regret. When he had screamed at Moldweorp, "[h]e'd crossed some threshold without knowing. Mongrel now, no longer pure. . . . After the final step you could not, nothing could be, clean" (137). The scales are tipped: the machine replaces the individual. Porpentine can only resign himself: "'You have been good enemies,' he said at last. It sounded wrong to him. Perhaps if there had been more time, time to learn the new role . . ." (137).

Pynchon concludes the story with an accelerated passage set in Sarajevo just before the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, the assassination which would trigger the First World War. Sixteen years after Porpentine's death, an aged, stooped Goodfellow is in Sarajevo to try to prevent any possible assassination attempt. History is repeating itself: "Rumors of an assassination, a possible spark to apocalypse" (137). But Goodfellow will fail: the Archduke will be assassinated, and Armageddon will "sweep the house of Europe." Goodfellow's sexual impotence (implied in the scene with Victoria Wren, 126-28) is analogous to his impotence in espionage: he is ineffectual in his attempt to prevent the apocalypse. The decaying old human order is impotent against the power of the machine age. The revolution has been too complete. Goodfellow becomes a farcical figure loitering in the streets of Sarajevo, unable to sexually satisfy a

"blonde barmaid with a mustache" (137), unable to prevent the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, unable to stop the machine.

By the time *Goodfellow* reaches Sarajevo, the individualistic society of old has largely evolved into a dehumanized industrial machine: it has given way to the forces of progress. Because the advent of the machine age—the rise of technology—brought with it a dehumanization, a denial of individual importance, a disintegration of older systems of honor and decorum, as well as a consolidation of power, a "closed circuit," a homogenization of humankind, Pynchon finds it justifiable to advocate a rational apprehension toward technology. He observes in "Is it O.K. to Be a Luddite" that "what has persisted, after a long quarter century [since Snow's lecture], is the element of human character" (1). This "human character" is made manifest in the Luddite's rational apprehension. It is not a fear of machines, as Snow might claim, but a caution made justifiable through a technological revolution with an ambiguous end.

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