IS IT O.K. TO BE A LUDDITE?

By Thomas Pynchon

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As if being 1984 weren't enough, it's also the 25th anniversary this year of C. P. Snow's famous Rede Lecture, ''The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,'' notable for its warning that intellectual life in the West was becoming increasingly polarized into ''literary'' and ''scientific'' factions, each doomed not to understand or appreciate the other. The lecture was originally meant to address such matters as curriculum reform in the age of Sputnik and the role of technology in the development of what would soon be known as the third world. But it was the two-culture formulation that got people's attention. In fact it kicked up an amazing row in its day. To some already simplified points, further reductions were made, provoking certain remarks, name-calling, even intemperate rejoinders, giving the whole affair, though attenuated by the mists of time, a distinctly cranky look.

Today nobody could get away with making such a distinction. Since 1959, we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen. Demystification is the order of our day, all the cats are jumping out of all the bags and even beginning to mingle. We immediately suspect ego insecurity in people who may still try to hide behind the jargon of a specialty or pretend to some data base forever ''beyond'' the reach of a layman. Anybody with the time, literacy and access fee these days can get together with just about any piece of specialized knowledge s/he may need. So, to that extent, the two-cultures quarrel can no longer be sustained. As a visit to any local library or magazine rack will easily confirm, there are now so many more than two cultures that the problem has really become how to find the time to read anything outside one's own specialty.

What has persisted, after a long quarter century, is the element of human character. C. P. Snow, with the reflexes of a novelist after all, sought to identify not only two kinds of education but also two kinds of personality. Fragmentary echoes of old disputes, of unforgotten offense taken in the course of long-ago high- table chitchat, may have helped form the subtext for Snow's immoderate, and thus celebrated, assertion, ''If we forget the scientific culture, then the rest of intellectuals have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the Industrial Revolution.'' Such ''intellectuals,'' for the most part ''literary,'' were supposed, by Lord Snow, to be ''natural Luddites.''

Except maybe for Brainy Smurf, it's hard to imagine anybody these days wanting to be called a literary intellectual, though it doesn't sound so bad if you broaden the labeling to, say, ''people who read and think.'' Being called a Luddite is another matter. It brings up questions such as, Is there something about reading and thinking that would cause or predispose a person to turn Luddite? Is it O.K. to be a Luddite? And come to think of it, what is a Luddite, anyway?

HISTORICALLY, Luddites flourished in Britain from about 1811 to 1816. They were bands of men, organized, masked, anonymous, whose object was to destroy machinery used mostly in the textile industry. They swore allegiance not to any British king but to their own King Ludd. It isn't clear whether they called themselves Luddites, although they were so termed by both friends and enemies. C. P. Snow's use of the word was clearly polemical, wishing to imply an irrational fear and hatred of science and technology. Luddites had, in this view, come to be imagined as the counterrevolutionaries of that ''Industrial Revolution'' which their modern versions have ''never tried, wanted, or been able to understand.''

But the Industrial Revolution was not, like the American and French Revolutions of about the same period, a violent struggle with a beginning, middle and end. It was smoother, less conclusive, more like an accelerated passage in a long evolution. The phrase was first popularized a hundred years ago by the historian Arnold Toynbee, and

has had its share of revisionist attention, lately in the July 1984 Scientific American. Here, in ''Medieval Roots of the Industrial Revolution,'' Terry S. Reynolds suggests that the early role of the steam engine (1765) may have been overdramatized. Far from being revolutionary, much of the machinery that steam was coming to drive had already long been in place, having in fact been driven by water power since the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the idea of a technosocial ''revolution,'' in which the same people came out on top as in France and America, has proven of use to many over the years, not least to those who, like C. P. Snow, have thought that in ''Luddite'' they have discovered a way to call those with whom they disagree both politically reactionary and anti-capitalist at the same time.

But the Oxford English Dictionary has an interesting tale to tell. In 1779, in a village somewhere in Leicestershire, one Ned Lud broke into a house and ''in a fit of insane rage'' destroyed two machines used for knitting hosiery. Word got around. Soon, whenever a stocking- frame was found sabotaged - this had been going on, sez the Encyclopedia Britannica, since about 1710 - folks would respond with the catch phrase ''Lud must have been here.'' By the time his name was taken up by the frame-breakers of 1812, historical Ned Lud was well absorbed into the more or less sarcastic nickname ''King (or Captain) Ludd,'' and was now all mystery, resonance and dark fun: a more-than-human presence, out in the night, roaming the hosiery districts of England, possessed by a single comic shtick - every time he spots a stocking-frame he goes crazy and proceeds to trash it.

But it's important to remember that the target even of the original assault of 1779, like many machines of the Industrial Revolution, was not a new piece of technology. The stocking-frame had been around since 1589, when, according to the folklore, it was invented by the Rev. William Lee, out of pure meanness. Seems that Lee was in love with a young woman who was more interested in her knitting than in him. He'd show up at her place. ''Sorry, Rev, got some knitting.'' ''What, again?'' After a while, unable to deal with this kind of rejection, Lee, not, like Ned Lud, in any fit of insane rage, but let's imagine logically and coolly, vowed to in vent a machine that would make the hand-knitting of hosiery obsolete. And he did. According to the encyclopedia, the jilted cleric's frame ''was so perfect in its conception that it continued to be the only mechanical means of knitting for hundreds of years.''

Now, given that kind of time span, it's just not easy to think of Ned Lud as a technophobic crazy. No doubt what people admired and mythologized him for was the vigor and single-mindedness of his assault. But the words ''fit of insane rage'' are third-hand and at least 68 years after the event. And Ned Lud's anger was not directed at the machines, not exactly. I like to think of it more as the controlled, martial-arts type anger of the dedicated Badass.

There is a long folk history of this figure, the Badass. He is usually male, and while sometimes earning the quizzical tolerance of women, is almost universally admired by men for two basic virtues: he is Bad, and he is Big. Bad meaning not morally evil, necessarily, more like able to work mischief on a large scale. What is important here is the amplifying of scale, the multiplication of effect.

The knitting machines which provoked the first Luddite disturbances had been putting people out of work for well over two centuries. Everybody saw this happening - it became part of daily life. They also saw the machines coming more and more to be the property of men who did not work, only owned and hired. It took no German philosopher, then or later, to point out what this did, had been doing, to wages and jobs. 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 - not to mention serious resentment toward at least two multiplications of effect that were seen as unfair and threatening. One was the concentration of capital that each machine represented, and the other was the ability of each machine to put a certain number of humans out of work - to be ''worth'' that many human souls. What gave King Ludd his special Bad charisma, took him from local hero to nationwide public enemy, was that he went up against these amplified, multiplied, more than human opponents and prevailed. When times are hard, and we feel at the mercy of forces many times more powerful, don't we, in seeking some equalizer, turn, if only in imagination, in wish, to the Badass - the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero - who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us? Of course, the real or secular frame-bashing was still being done by everyday folks, trade unionists ahead of their time, using the night, and their own solidarity and discipline, to achieve their multiplications of effect.

It was open-eyed class war. The movement had its Parliamentary allies, among them Lord Byron, whose maiden speech in the House of Lords in 1812 compassionately argued against a bill proposing, among other repressive measures, to make frame-breaking punishable by death. ''Are you not near the Luddites?'' he wrote from Venice to Thomas Moore. ''By the Lord! if there's a row, but I'll be among ye! How go on the weavers - the breakers of frames - the Lutherans of politics - the reformers?'' He includes an ''amiable

chanson,

'' which proves to be a Luddite hymn so inflammatory that it wasn't published till after the poet's death. The letter is dated December 1816: Byron had spent the summer previous in Switzerland, cooped up for a while in the Villa Diodati with the Shelleys, watching the rain come down, while they all told each other ghost stories. By that December, as it happened, Mary Shelley was working on Chapter Four of her novel ''Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus.''

If there were such a genre as the Luddite novel, this one, warning of what can happen when technology, and those who practice it, get out of hand, would be the first and among the best. Victor Frankenstein's creature also, surely, qualifies as a major literary Badass. ''I resolved . . .,'' Victor tells us, ''to make the being of a gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large,'' which takes care of Big. The story of how he got to be so Bad is the heart of the novel, sheltered innermost: told to Victor in the first person by the creature himself, then nested inside of Victor's own narrative, which is nested in its turn in the letters of the arctic explorer Robert Walton. However much of ''Frankenstein's'' longevity is owing to the undersung genius James Whale, who translated it to film, it remains today more than well worth reading, for all the reasons we read novels, as well as for the much more limited question of its Luddite value: that is, for its attempt, through literary means which are nocturnal and deal in disguise, to

deny the machine.

Look, for example, at Victor's account of how he assembles and animates his creature. He must, of course, be a little vague about the details, but we're left with a procedure that seems to include surgery, electricity (though nothing like Whale's galvanic extravaganzas), chemistry, even, from dark hints about Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus, the still recently discredited form of magic known as alchemy. What is clear, though, despite the commonly depicted Bolt Through the Neck, is that neither the method nor the creature that results is mechanical.

This is one of several interesting similarities between ''Frankenstein'' and an earlier tale of the Bad and Big, ''The Castle of Otranto'' (1765), by Horace Walpole, usually regarded as the first Gothic novel. For one thing, both authors, in presenting their books to the public, used voices not their own. Mary Shelley's preface was written by her husband, Percy, who was pretending to be her. Not till 15 years later did she write an introduction to ''Frankenstein'' in her own voice. Walpole, on the other hand, gave his book an entire made-up publishing history, claiming it was a translation from medieval Italian. Only in his preface to the second edition did he admit authorship.

THE novels are also of strikingly similar nocturnal origin: both resulted from episodes of lucid dreaming. Mary Shelley, that ghost-story summer in Geneva, trying to get to sleep one midnight, suddenly beheld the creature being brought to life, the images arising in her mind ''with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie.'' Walpole had awakened from a dream, ''of which, all I could remember was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle . . . and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour.''

In Walpole's novel, this hand shows up as the hand of Alfonso the Good, former Prince of Otranto and, despite his epithet, the castle's resident Badass. Alfonso, like

Frankenstein's creature, is assembled from pieces - sable-plumed helmet, foot, leg, sword, all of them, like the hand, quite oversized - which fall from the sky or just materialize here and there about the castle grounds, relentless as Freud's slow return of the repressed. The activating agencies, again like those in ''Frankenstein,'' are non-mechanical. The final assembly of ''the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude,'' is achieved through supernatural means: a family curse, and the intercession of Otranto's patron saint.

The craze for Gothic fiction after ''The Castle of Otranto'' was grounded, I suspect, in deep and religious yearnings for that earlier mythical time which had come to be known as the Age of Miracles. In ways more and less literal, folks in the 18th century believed that once upon a time all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so. Giants, dragons, spells. The laws of nature had not been so strictly formulated back then. What had once been true working magic had, by the Age of Reason, degenerated into mere machinery. Blake's dark Satanic mills represented an old magic that, like Satan, had fallen from grace. As religion was being more and more secularized into Deism and nonbelief, the abiding human hunger for evidence of God and afterlife, for salvation - bodily resurrection, if possible - remained. The Methodist movement and the American Great Awakening were only two sectors on a broad front of resistance to the Age of Reason, a front which included Radicalism and Freemasonry as well as Luddites and the Gothic novel. Each in its way expressed the same profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ''irrational,'' to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it was doing. ''Gothic'' became code for ''medieval,'' and that has remained code for ''miraculous,'' on through Pre-Raphaelites, turn-of-the-century tarot cards, space opera in the pulps and the comics, down to ''Star Wars'' and contemporary tales of sword and sorcery.

TO insist on the miraculous is to deny to the machine at least some of its claims on us, to assert the limited wish that living things, earthly and otherwise, may on occasion become Bad and Big enough to take part in transcendent doings. By this theory, for example, King Kong (?-1933) becomes your classic Luddite saint. The final dialogue in the movie, you recall, goes: ''Well, the airplanes got him.'' ''No . . . it was Beauty killed the Beast.'' In which again we encounter the same Snovian Disjunction, only different, between the human and the technological.

But if we do insist upon fictional violations of the laws of nature - of space, time, thermodynamics, and the big one, mortality itself - then we risk being judged by the literary mainstream as Insufficiently Serious. Being serious about these matters is one way that adults have traditionally defined themselves against the confidently immortal children they must deal with. Looking back on ''Frankenstein,'' which she wrote when she was 19, Mary Shelley said, ''I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words which found no true echo in my

heart.'' The Gothic attitude in general, because it used images of death and ghostly survival toward no more responsible end than special effects and cheap thrills, was judged not Serious enough and confined to its own part of town. It is not the only neighborhood in the great City of Literature so, let us say, closely defined. In westerns, the good people always win. In romance novels, love conquers all. In whodunits, murder, being a pretext for a logical puzzle, is hardly ever an irrational act. In science fiction, where entire worlds may be generated from simple sets of axioms, the constraints of our own everyday world are routinely transcended. In each of these cases we know better. We say, ''But the world isn't like that.'' These genres, by insisting on what is contrary to fact, fail to be Serious enough, and so they get redlined under the label ''escapist fare.''

This is especially unfortunate in the case of science fiction, in which the decade after Hiroshima saw one of the most remarkable flowerings of literary talent and, quite often, genius, in our history. It was just as important as the Beat movement going on at the same time, certainly more important than mainstream fiction, which with only a few exceptions had been paralyzed by the political climate of the cold war and McCarthy years. Besides being a nearly ideal synthesis of the Two Cultures, science fiction also happens to have been one of the principal refuges, in our time, for those of Luddite persuasion.

By 1945, the factory system - which, more than any piece of machinery, was the real and major result of the Industrial Revolution - had been extended to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz. It has taken no major gift of prophecy to see how these three curves of development might plausibly converge, and before too long. Since Hiroshima, we have watched nuclear weapons multiply out of control, and delivery systems acquire, for global purposes, unlimited range and accuracy. An unblinking acceptance of a holocaust running to seven- and eight-figure body counts has become - among those who, particularly since 1980, have been guiding our military policies - conventional wisdom.

To people who were writing science fiction in the 50's, none of this was much of a surprise, though modern Luddite imaginations have yet to come up with any countercritter Bad and Big enough, even in the most irresponsible of fictions, to begin to compare with what would happen in a nuclear war. So, in the science fiction of the Atomic Age and the cold war, we see the Luddite impulse to deny the machine taking a different direction. The hardware angle got de-emphasized in favor of more humanistic concerns - exotic cultural evolutions and social scenarios, paradoxes and games with space/ time, wild philosophical questions - most of it sharing, as the critical literature has amply discussed, a definition of ''human'' as particularly distinguished from ''machine.'' Like their earlier counterparts, 20th-century Luddites looked back

yearningly to another age - curiously, the same Age of Reason which had forced the first Luddites into nostalgia for the Age of Miracles.

But we now live, we are told, in the Computer Age. What is the outlook for Luddite sensibility? Will mainframes attract the same hostile attention as knitting frames once did? I really doubt it. Writers of all descriptions are stampeding to buy word processors. Machines have already become so user-friendly that even the most unreconstructed of Luddites can be charmed into laying down the old sledgehammer and stroking a few keys instead. Beyond this seems to be a growing consensus that knowledge really is power, that there is a pretty straightforward conversion between money and information, and that somehow, if the logistics can be worked out, miracles may yet be possible. If this is so, Luddites may at last have come to stand on common ground with their Snovian adversaries, the cheerful army of technocrats who were supposed to have the ''future in their bones.'' It may be only a new form of the perennial Luddite ambivalence about machines, or it may be that the deepest Luddite hope of miracle has now come to reside in the computer's ability to get the right data to those whom the data will do the most good. With the proper deployment of budget and computer time, we will cure cancer, save ourselves from nuclear extinction, grow food for everybody, detoxify the results of industrial greed gone berserk - realize all the wistful pipe dreams of our days.

THE word ''Luddite'' continues to be applied with contempt to anyone with doubts about technology, especially the nuclear kind. Luddites today are no longer faced with human factory owners and vulnerable machines. As well-known President and unintentional Luddite D. D. Eisenhower prophesied when he left office, there is now a permanent power establishment of admirals, generals and corporate CEO's, up against whom us average poor bastards are completely outclassed, although Ike didn't put it quite that way. We are all supposed to keep tranquil and allow it to go on, even though, because of the data revolution, it becomes every day less possible to fool any of the people any of the time.

If our world survives, the next great challenge to watch out for will come - you heard it here first - when the curves of research and development in artificial intelligence, molecular biology and robotics all converge. Oboy. It will be amazing and unpredictable, and even the biggest of brass, let us devoutly hope, are going to be caught flat-footed. It is certainly something for all good Luddites to look forward to if, God willing, we should live so long. Meantime, as Americans, we can take comfort, however minimal and cold, from Lord Byron's mischievously improvised song, in which he, like other observers of the time, saw clear identification between the first Luddites and our own revolutionary origins. It begins:

As the Liberty lads o'er the sea

Bought their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,

So we, boys, we

Will

die

fighting, or

live

free, And down with all kings but King Ludd!

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