

**Emile Goudeau: *The Revolt of the Machines***

(1891)

Dr. Pastoureaux, aided by a very skillful old workman named Jean Bertrand, had invented a machine that revolutionized the scientific world. That machine was animate, almost capable of thought, almost capable of will, and sensitive: a kind of animal in iron. There is no need here to go into overly complicated technical details, which would be a waste of time. Let it suffice to know that with a series of platinum containers, penetrated by phosphoric acid, the scientist had found a means to give a kind of soul to fixed or locomotive machines; and that the new entities would be able to act in the fashion of a metal bull or a steel elephant.

It is necessary to add that, although the scientist became increasingly enthusiastic about his work, old Jean Bertrand, who was diabolically superstitious, gradually became frightened on perceiving that sudden evocation of intelligence in something primordially dead. In addition, the comrades of the factory, who were assiduous followers of public meetings, were all sternly opposed to machines that serve as the slaves of capitalism and tyrants of the worker.

It was the eve of the inauguration of the masterpiece.

For the first time, the machine had been equipped with all its organs, and external sensations reached it distinctly. It understood that, in spite of the shackles that still retained it, solid limbs were fitted to its young being, and that it would soon be able to translate into external movement that which it experienced internally.

This is what it heard:

“Were you at the public meeting yesterday?” said one voice.

“I should think so, old man,” replied a blacksmith, a kind of Hercules with bare muscular arms. Bizarrely illuminated by the gas jets of the workshop, his face, black with dust, only left visible in the gloom the whites of his two large eyes, in which vivacity replaced intelligence. “Yes, I was there; I even spoke against the machines, against the monsters that our arms fabricate, and which, one day, will give infamous capitalism the opportunity, so long sought, to suppress our arms. We’re the ones forging the weapons with which bourgeois society will batter us. When the sated, the rotten and the weak have a heap of facile clockwork devices like these to set in motion”—his arm made a circular motion—“our account will soon be settled. We who are living at the present moment eat by procreating the tools of our definitive expulsion from the world. Hola! No need to make children for them to be lackeys of the bourgeoisie!”

Listening with all its auditory valves to this diatribe, the machine, intelligent but as yet naïve, sighed with pity. It wondered whether it was a good thing that it should be born to render these brave workers miserable in this way.

“Ah,” the blacksmith vociferated, “if it were only up to me and my section, we’d blow all this up like an omelet. Our arms would be perfectly sufficient thereafter”—he tapped his biceps—“to dig the earth to find our bread there; the bourgeois, with their four-sou muscles, their vitiated blood and their soft legs, could pay us dearly for the bread, and if they complained, damn it, these two fists could take away their taste for it. But I’m talking to brutes who don’t understand hatred.” Advancing toward the machine, he added: “If everyone were like me, you wouldn’t live for another quarter of an hour, see!” And his formidable fist came down on the copper flank, which resounded with a long quasi-human groan.

Jean Bertrand, who witnessed that scene, shivered tenderly, feeling guilty with regard to his brothers, because he had helped the doctor to accomplish his masterpiece.

Then they all went away, and the machine, still listening, remembered in the silence of the night. It was, therefore, unwelcome in the world! It was going to ruin poor workingmen, to the advantage of damnable exploiters! Oh, it sensed now the oppressive role that those who had created it wanted it to play. Suicide rather than that!

And in its mechanical and infantile soul, it ruminated a magnificent project to astonish, on the great day of its inauguration, the population of ignorant, retrograde and cruel machines, by giving them an example of sublime abnegation.

Until tomorrow!

Meanwhile, at the table of the Comte de Valrouge, the celebrated patron of chemists, a scientist was concluding his toast to Dr. Pastoureaux in the following terms:

“Yes, Monsieur, science will procure the definitive triumph of suffering humankind. It has already done a great deal; it has tamed time and space. Our railways, our telegraphs and our telephones have suppressed distance. If we succeed, as Dr. Pastoureaux seems to anticipate, in demonstrating that we can put intelligence into our machines, humans will be liberated forever from servile labor.

“No more serfs, no more proletariat! Everyone will become bourgeois! The slave machine will liberate from slavery our humbler brethren and give them the right of citizenship among us. No more unfortunate miners obliged to descend underground at the peril of their lives; indefatigable and eternal machines will go down for them; the thinking and acting machine, no suffering in labor, will build, under our command, iron bridges and heroic palaces. It is docile and good machines that will plow the fields.

“Well, Messieurs, it is permissible for me, in the presence of this admirable discovery, to make myself an instant prophet. A day will come when machines, always running hither and yon, will operate themselves, like the carrier pigeons of Progress; one day, perhaps, having received their complementary education, they will learn to obey a simple signal in such a way that a man, sitting peacefully and comfortably in the bosom of his family, will only have to press an electro-vitalic switch in order for machines to sow the wheat, harvest it, store it and bake the bread that it will bring to the tables of humankind, and thus finally become the King of Nature.

“In that Olympian era, the animals, too, delivered from their enormous share of labor, will be able to applaud with their four feet.” (*Emotion and smiles.*) “Yes, Messieurs, for they will be our friends, after having been our whipping-boys. The ox will always have to serve in making soup” (*smiles*) “but at least it will not suffer beforehand.

“I drink, then, to Dr. Pastoureaux, to the liberator of organic matter, to the savior of the brain and sensitive flesh, to the great and noble destroyer of suffering!”

The speech was warmly applauded. Only one jealous scientist put in a word:

“Will this machine have the fidelity of a dog, then? The docility of a horse? Or even the passivity of present-day machines?”

“I don’t know,” Pastoureaux replied. “I don’t know.” And, suddenly plunged into a scientific melancholy, he added: “Can a father be assured of filial gratitude? That the being that I have brought into the world might have evil instincts, I can’t deny. I believe, however, that I have developed within it, during its fabrication, a great propensity for tenderness and a spirit of goodness—what is commonly called ‘heart.’ The effective parts of my machine, Messieurs, have cost me many months of labor; it ought to have a great deal of humanity, and, if I might put it thus, the best of fraternity.”

“Yes,” replied the jealous scientist, “ignorant pity, the popular pity that leads men astray, the intelligent tenderness that makes them commit the worst of sins. I’m afraid that your sentimental machine will go astray, like a child. Better a clever wickedness than a clumsy bounty.”

The interrupter was told to shut up, and Pastoureaux concluded: “Whether good or evil emerges from all this, I have, I think, made a formidable stride in human science. The five fingers of our hand will hold henceforth the supreme art of creation.”

Bravos burst forth.

The next day, the machine was unmuzzled, and it came of its own accord, docilely, to take up its position before a numerous but selective assembly. The doctor and old Jean Bertrand installed themselves on the platform.

The excellent band of the Republican Guard began playing, and cries of “Hurrah for Science!” burst forth. Then, after having bowed to the President of the Republic, the authorities, the delegations of the

Académies, the foreign representatives, and all the notable people assembled on the quay, Dr. Pastoureaux ordered Jean Bertrand to put himself in direct communication with the soul of the machine, with all its muscles of platinum and steel.

The mechanic did that quite simply by pulling a shiny lever the size of a penholder.

And suddenly, whistling, whinnying, pitching, rolling and fidgeting, in the ferocity of its new life and the exuberance of its formidable power, the machine started running around furiously.

“Hip hip hurrah!” cried the audience.

“Go, machine of the devil, go!” cried Jean Bertrand—and, like a madman, he leaned on the vital lever.

Without listening to the doctor, who wanted to moderate that astonishing speed, Bertrand spoke to the machine.

“Yes, machine of the devil, go, go! If you understand, go! Poor slave of capital, go! Flee! Flee! Save the brothers! Save us! Don’t render us even more unhappy than before! Me, I’m old, I don’t care about myself—but the others, the poor fellows with hollow cheeks and thin legs, save them, worthy machine! Be good, as I told you this morning! If you know how to think, as they all insist, show it! What can dying matter to you, since you won’t suffer? Me, I’m willing to perish with you, for the profit of others, and yet it will do me harm. Go, good machine, go!”

He was mad.

The doctor tried then to retake control of the iron beast.

“Gently, machine!” he cried.

But Jean Bertrand pushed him away rudely. “Don’t listen to the sorcerer! Go, machine, go!”

And, drunk on air, he patted the copper flanks of the Monster, which, whistling furiously, traversed an immeasurable distance with its six wheels.

To leap from the platform was impossible. The doctor resigned himself, and, filled with his love of science, took a notebook from his pocket and tranquilly set about making notes, like Pliny on Cap Misene.<sup>1</sup>

At Nord-Ceinture, overexcited, the machine was certainly carried away. Bounding over the bank, it started running through the zone. The Monster’s anger and madness was translated in strident shrill whistle-blasts, as lacerating as a human plaint and sometimes as raucous as the howling of a pack of hounds. Distant locomotives soon responded to that appeal, along with the whistles of factories and blast furnaces. Things were beginning to comprehend.

A ferocious concert of revolt commenced beneath the sky, and suddenly, throughout the suburb, boilers burst, pipes broke, wheels shattered, levers twisted convulsively and axle-trees flew joyfully into pieces.

All the machines, as if moved by a word of order, went on strike successively—and not only steam and electricity; to that raucous appeal, the soul of Metal rose up, exciting the soul of Stone, so long tamed, and the obscure soul of the Vegetal, and the force of Coal. Rails reared up of their own accord, telegraph wires were scattered on the ground inexplicably, and reservoirs of gas sent their enormous beams and weight to the devil. Cannons exploded against walls, and the walls crumbled.

Soon, plows, harrows, spades—all the machines once turned against the bosom of the earth, from which they had emerged—were lying down upon the ground, refusing any longer to serve humankind. Axes respected trees, and scythes no longer bit into ripe wheat.

Everywhere, as the living locomotive passed by, the soul of Bronze finally woke up.

Humans fled in panic.

Soon, the entire territory, overloaded with human debris, was no longer anything but a field of twisted and charred rubble. Nineveh had taken the place of Paris.

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<sup>1</sup> Pliny the Younger observed the eruption of Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii from the home of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, in Misenum; his letters to Cornelius Tacitus describing his experiences have survived.

The Machine, still blowing indefatigably, abruptly turned its course northwards. When it passed by, at its strident cry, everything was suddenly destroyed, as if an evil wind, a cyclone of devastation, a frightful volcano, had agitated there.

With the signal approaching on the wind, ships plumed with smoke heard the formidable signal, they disemboweled themselves and sank into the abyss.

The revolt terminated in a gigantic suicide of Steel.

The fantastic Machine, out of breath now, limping on its wheels and producing a horrible screech of metal in all its disjointed limbs, its funnel demolished—the Skeleton-Machine to which, terrified and exhausted, the rude workman and the prim scientist instinctively clung—heroically mad, gasping one last whistle of atrocious joy, reared up before the spray of the Ocean, and, in a supreme effort, plunged into it entirely.

The earth, stretching into the distance, was covered in ruins. No more dykes or houses; the cities, the masterpieces of Technology, were flattened into rubble. No more anything! Everything that the Machine had built in centuries past had been destroyed forever: Iron, Steel, Copper, Wood and Stone, having been conquered by the rebel will of Humankind, had been snatched from human hands.

The Animals, no longer having any bridle, nor any collar, chain, yoke or cage, had taken back the free space from which they had long been exiled; the wild Brutes with gaping maws and paws armed with claws recovered terrestrial royalty at a stroke. No more rifles, no more arrows to fear, no more slingshots. Human beings became the weakest of the weak again.

Oh, there were certainly no longer any classes: no scientists, no bourgeois, no workers, no artists, but only pariahs of Nature, raising despairing eyes toward the mute heavens, still thinking vaguely, when horrible Dread and hideous Fear left them an instant of respite, and sometimes, in the evening, talking about the time of the Machines, when they had been Kings. Defunct times! They possessed definitive Equality, therefore, in the annihilation of all.

Living on roots, grass and wild oats, they fled before the immense troops of Wild Beasts, which, finally, could eat at their leisure human steaks or chops.

A few bold Hercules tried to uproot trees in order to make weapons of them, but even the Staff, considering itself to be a Machine, refused itself to the hands of the audacious.

And human beings, the former monarchs, bitterly regretted the Machines that had made them gods upon the earth, and disappeared forever, before the elephants, the noctambulant lions, the bicorn aurochs and the immense bears.

Such was the tale told to me the other evening by a Darwinian philosopher, a partisan of intellectual aristocracy and hierarchy. He was a madman, perhaps a seer. The madman or the seer might have been right; is there not an end to everything, even a new fantasy?