

The Sloth of Luddite Sorrow in Thomas Pynchon's Writings

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Abstract

The technological inventions have been dominating the present times. The world is in awe of the way AI is replacing human intelligence but not without a remorse fear of the threat of apocalypses this AI and Scientific expansion could cause. The scientific and technological advancement has made the imperialism, subjugation and exploitation seamless and transcendent. The public fail to recognize this transcendent exploitation as their vision is outshined by miraculous sophistication these inventions ducks human life with. Some good minds might envision the ramifications but fear to be branded as luddites. Almost thirty nine years ago Pynchon foresees the paradoxical paranoia and reassures to be fine be a luddite. He professes that a person with the sloth of luddite sorrow is a real human defeating the merciless omniscient exploitation. Though this vision of Pynchon pervades all his novels, my article refers to his magna Opus *Gravity's Rainbow* and his mature novel *Vineland* to illustrate his vision.

Keywords: Scientific and Techonological inventions, AI, transcendent exploitation, Paradoxical paranoia, and the sloth of Luddite Sorrow.

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!

--- Lord Byron.

The extract is the opening stanza of "Song of the Luddite," a poem by the Romantic poet and a member of the House of the Lords, Lord Byron. In 1812 a bill was introduced in the House of the Lords which proposed death penalty to the frame breakers or Luddites. The Luddites were the radical English textile workers who protested against weaving machines. The skilled weavers who had been trained in the craft of weaving lost their only source of livelihood when the weaving machines were preferred by the local capitalists in the wake of the Industrialization. Between 1811 and 1817, the unemployed luddites were enraged by the usurpation of opportunities and drain of wealth due to the replacement of human craft by the weaving machines. The protesting weavers took one Ned Ludd, their predecessor, as their captain and king and proclaimed themselves as Luddites. In 1799 Ned Ludd, a weaver from Leicestershire, "in fit of insane rage" against stocking-frame, broke two stocking-frames which made hand knitting irrelevant and jobless. Ned Ludd is the eponymous king of the English radical textile workers. Lord Byron empathized with Luddites' economic and social deprivation which was caused by the industrial revolution. Hence he impassionedly denounced the Luddites death penalty bill. Later in

1815, he gave a clarion call to the Greek freedom fighters to fight till the death like luddites whose lord was no other than Ned Ludd or King Ludd. In the quoted stanza Byron is a freedom aspiring Luddite. This quoted stanza, Thomas Pynchon opines, gives the contemporary luddites a bit of comfort before the apocalyptic convergence of Artificial Intelligence, molecular biology, and robotics catch all of us ill prepared. Thomas Pynchon is an American Postmodern writer whose novels encrypt the intricate nuances of human reality which is always a story of helpless subjugation and exploitation. Some of his important works are *V.*, *Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, etc.

Today, a person who is apprehensive and against the technology and machinery are called Luddites. On 7 May 1959, Charles Percy Snow delivered a polemic lecture titled “*Two Cultures.*” Subsequently, the lecture was published in the form of a book, *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. The lecture and the book had rebuked all the intelligentsia, whom Snow believed, were not recognizing the science as a serious subject; as serious as the humanities. He had classified the academia into the humanities and the science. He wanted the intelligentsia to accept the supremacy of the Science as it was the Science invented weaponry that had won the World Wars in the favour of the Allied forces. He voiced his dismay towards humanities by condemning them as the luddites. Since then an irreconcilable hostility between the Humanities and Sciences has engulfed the academics and the intelligentsia.

Pynchon marks the silver Jubilee of C.P. Snow's vilification of the humanities' scholars as luddites with his prophetic article, “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?” This article makes us realize that the public of every generation from the industrial revolution to the present era of IT are luddites as they share love and hate relationship with the scientific inventions and technological innovations like steam run machines or nuclear weapons or robots or cosmetic surgeries or astronomic discoveries etc. A romantic credence that the magical gigantic invincible creatures might surface at any time to dismantle the indomitable scientific machinery and Technology which enable a smooth execution and exploitation and monopoly is born out of this Luddite temperament in the people. Pynchon unravels the Luddite spirit in the creation and the success of Horace Walpole's the hand of Alfonso the Good, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and King Kong movies. The apocalyptic threat from the machinery, weaponry, and scientific creatures is counter balanced by a romantic hope that a Big Badass similar to Ludd with sheer human will and strength, in these literary and cinematic creations. The origin of Frankenstein, the hand of Alfonso, and King Kong is from the non mechanical and technological. The hand of the Alfonso is assembled from sable-plumed helmet, foot, leg, and sword. The badass hand comes from the sky to punish the bad system of advanced Industrial Capitalism. Frankenstein is a gigantic badass which is composed out of surgery, electricity, chemistry, and alchemy. The ruthless Frankenstein could destroy anything in the invincible Industrial capitalism and its system which is unlikely to be destroyed by the human power. The Luddite in the post war era of factory capitalism is King Kong. Again, Kong is an enormous primitive Ape. No human machine or system can withstand the merciless attack of Kong, except love. The three Luddite romantic creations reveal the public fear towards capitalistic machinery and its parallel hope for the demolishment of the same.

Pynchon's essay agrees that the present era of computer and Information has not found a perfect Luddite figure to relieve its fears of apocalypse. Technological Knowledge is inevitable in the present time. At present, in the data era, information is directly transferable to money. The article underlines the paradox in the expansion of the technological knowledge. The data technological advancement is decentralizing the means of opportunities for better living. At the same time the monopoly of the corporate powers over the data technology and other technological knowledge is anonymously and

enormously stealing away the authority of the individual to mould and conduct her/his life on the line of equality, liberty and Justice. The paradoxical status quo is explained in the following words by Pynchon. He writes, 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 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. (“Luddite” 5)

The alarming angle in this status quo is that the chances of monopolization and manipulation of the technology in favor of the exploiter are immense. Thus, the seemingly indiscriminate era of technology, in the practice, serves the same old system of exploitation in the most indiscernible and effective way. The greed of the technologically empowered capitalism and the complacency of the larger public land us at the apocalypses of dangerous convergence of artificial intelligence, molecular biology, and robotics.

The article of Pynchon is thirty nine year old. The Luddite status quo in favour of the exploiter in the contemporary time as rationalized by Pynchon’s Luddite article can be traced in the Marvel Avengers series. The core avengers are Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, The American Captain, The Black Widow and Hawkeye. Except Thor and Hawkeye the remaining avengers possess superhuman powers inducted in them through scientific technology. Thor is of godly origin and Hawkeye is an exceptionally talented archer. The villains that bring the apocalyptic threat to people are also the combination of mythical and technological origin. Loki the villain in the first movie is of Mythical origin. Specter’s gem is the perfect specimen of what Pynchon has predicted the apocalypse of convergence of artificial intelligence, Molecular biology and robotics. Specter’s gem is the apocalyptic force in the second movie of Avengers series, *Ultron*. Thanos the apocalyptic villain in the third and fourth movies in the Avengers series is a blend of the supernatural and astrology as he is the conqueror of all the known worlds. The inference is that the saviors and the destructors hail from the Luddite status quo. The technological knowledge is the villain and the hero while retaining the medieval faith in the magic and miracle.

The Avengers series epitomizes the Luddite status quo in favour of the exploiter. Biased hierarchy is a feature of exploiter system. The Avengers team is a biased hierarchy. The American Captain is bestowed this undue credit at the end of every movie. In the team of Avengers Ironman, and Hulk are experts of Science and technology apart from being the powerful fighters. Hulk and Thor become the badass fighters who crush the majority of the opposition force. Black Widow and Hawkeye are the unfaltering backup force. By the end of every movie, in so incongruous manner, Captain America is established as the champion of Avenger Champions. The extreme point of this biased depiction of Captain America is the final confrontation of Avengers with Thanos. Irrationally, Captain America wields Thor’s hammer, Mjölfnir.

Moline is a hammer Thor only can weigh with his power of Thunder. Hulk is the second strongest of the Avengers after Thor. Captain America possesses neither physical strength nor scientific composition to wield Mjölfnir. Still so injudiciously Captain America handles the Mjölfnir. This depiction demonstrates the director's and producer's will that America must dominate. So, Avenger's movie is the continuation of the irony of the world wars. The Allied countries proclaimed themselves the champions of the human safety and justice: which was threatened by the fascist forces. A critical study of history unearths the reality that the Allied capitalism has replaced the fascist imperialism. The Avengers defeat the greedy monsters to consolidate the superiority of their biased hierarchy which is headed by American Captain. The Biased supremacy is what translates to dictatorship or fascism. The Apocalypse of our times resides in this Puzzle that apparent liberation of opportunities and resources are, in reality, in the iron clutches of the greedy authoritarianism. Thomas Pynchon's novels peel off the translucent alluding masks of the reign of corporate authoritarianism by means of Artificial Intelligence, molecular Biology and Robotics. The apocalypse from the convergence of artificial intelligence, molecular biology and robotics is the manifestation of the absence of the sloth in the people. Though it is surprising to read "absence of Sloth" as the founding cause of Apocalypse, Pynchon conceptualization of Sloth convinces to the proposition. Our traditional and modern or religious and secular principles discourage the people to commit the sin of sloth. In simpler terms, sloth means being lazy. Straining ourselves as less as possible is being lazy. This plain nature in human beings is condemned as sin in the both the religious and secular spheres. The witty writer, Pynchon has written an article on Sloth. The caption of the article is "The Deadly Sins/Sloth; Nearer, My Couch, to Thee," came out on sixth June 1993. Pynchon defines sloth as Acedia. Acedia is Greek origin term which means 'spiritual apathy.' The article interprets how the meaning of the term sloth has happened to evolve over the generation. In the primitive and medieval times the word Sloth has been used to define the spiritual shallowness of a person. Then, Sloth meant the human act of evading the directions of the consciences while conducting their lives. It is human weakness to postpone the spiritual urges like the responsibility of being truthful etc., to fulfill the immediate material urges like to quench the greed etc. The sloth departed from this original sense as with changing economic conditions of the people.

In the eighteenth century sloth had referred to the person who did not follow the norm 'early to bed is early to rise.' The motive of this norm was to serve the unwritten rule, optimize every minute of mortal time to mint the material benefits like earn more wages, more pleasures and more revenge etc. The nineteenth century further modified the term. In this century the term indicated the inertia of an individual to be oblivion to the injustice and inhumanity which was being nurtured and spread around by the capitalism. Burden by her/his guilty, if a person had not participated in the executive world of capitalism, she/he was called Sloth. In order to illustrate the Sloth of guilty in the nineteenth century, Pynchon outlines Bartleby character in "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street, a short-story" of Herman Melville. Bartleby was a new and young scrivener in the office of a lawyer who is the narrator of the story. The lawyer had his practice on the Wall Street. For a few days Bartleby did a good job as the scrivener. Suddenly, it happened so that when the senior lawyer asked his scrivener to examine the documents, Bartleby curtly replies that "I prefer not to." Since then, this statement "I prefer not to" was his single verbal response. For many days he sat in front of a wall, stared at the wall all the time other than his sleeping time and died. Pynchon analyses his condition saying that Bartleby has mildly refused to collaborate with the capitalist's slaughter of humanity and justice. So, his spiritual guilty, on the face of injustice and his alienation, has embossed him to be a sloth. Pynchon declares Bartleby as first great

modern sloth.

The Sloth acquired a political colour in the 1920s and 30s, posits Pynchon. During this time sloth was the incompetence of the people to challenge the political policies of authoritarianism, exploitation, and violence. Given his or her ineptitude, the slothful person had immerses himself or herself in the intoxication of the tube and its illusions. Now, in the contemporary time Pynchon announces that Perhaps the future of Sloth will lie in sinning against what now seems increasingly to define us -- technology. Persisting in Luddite sorrow, despite technology's good intentions, there we'll sit with our heads in virtual reality, glumly refusing to be absorbed in its idle, disposable fantasies, even those about superheroes of Sloth back in Sloth's good old days, full of leisurely but lethal misadventures with the ruthless villains of the Acedia Squad. ("The Deadly Sins/Sloth; Nearer, My Couch, to Thee" 4)

What did Pynchon call future in 1993, the year of composition of this article, is the twenty first century of Artificial Intelligence, molecular biology, robotics, and nuclear weapons. The definition of sloth today is "Persistin in Luddite sorrow," Pynchon postulates, in the above quote. The technology as elucidate in the earlier part of this article is yielding opportunities to sophisticate one's life at the cost of losing one's power to determine the course of his existence. The more you participate in the time saving and effort reducing technological world the more you are isolated and vulnerable to exploitation. The Aadhar card (Unique Identification Authority of India Card) system is one the best examples of paradoxical implications of the technology. The Aadhar link has helped to over the come the red-tapism and delay in the delivery of the public services to the people. However, it enables the monopoly of the information which can be easily misused to loot an individual. The safety of an individual is at the mercy of a single stroke of a cybernetic expert. An individual is safe and sound as long as an aggressor with computer knowledge does not hack the individual's information. To cripple the system of our nation any aggressor nation can hack and erase our information from the digital systems. The dawn of cyber espionage is being greatly felt in the geo-politics. America itself is a victim of cyber espionage. Cyber espionage might seem like a geo- political matter. The deployment of cyber espionage happens, whenever it happens, to guard and serve the interests of the international corporate as it is the agenda of majority of the international power. Stealing the digital data of other nations and manipulating has become a common practice in these days. The case of cyber espionage is just a tip of the iceberg to indicate the anonymous disasters the technological advances could pose to the people of the world. Detecting the anonymous apocalypse from the technology, if anyone refuses to use technology then the person truly becomes a hairy ape that has no place in the society. All that a person who could foresee the apocalypse from the technology run by the international corporate power could do is be a sloth of luddite sorrow.

Obeying the human instinct to quench the immediate material benefits the majority of the people religiously shake off the Sloth. Let me define sloth in the present context, it is a concern about the injustice and inhumanity by lethal and omnipotent corporate serving technological curve of AI, Molecular Biology and Robotics is being ignored by the contemporary generation. Hence the prophecy of Pynchon's novels is the apocalypse of absence of sloth – a luddite sorrow. The stated idea of Thomas Pynchon's apocalypse evolved with his maturity. His apocalypse theme emits as entropy in his short story "Entropy" and emerges as dearth of sloth. The most explicit disclosure of eschatology in the work of Thomas Pynchon occurs in the Introduction of his short stories collection, *Slow Learner*. The apocalyptic entropy is the consolidation of two ideas. The two ideas are Henry Adam's idea of unabated power and Norbert Wiener's idea of heat-death. Pynchon records about these two influences in the

following words,

I happened to read Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings* (a rewrite for the interested layman of his more technical *Cybernetics*) at about the same time as *The Education of Henry Adams*, and the "theme" of story is mostly derivative of what these two men had to say. A pose I found congenial in those days - fairly common, I hope, among pre-adults - was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline. The modern political thriller genre, in fact, has been known to cash in on such visions of death made large-scale or glamorous. Given my under graduate mood, Adams's sense of power out of control, coupled with Wiener's spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket. But the distance and grandiosity of this led me to short-change the humans in the story. I think they come off as synthetic, insufficiently alive. (13)

Pynchon's third and seminal novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* is the most crafty and prevaricating limn of the apocalyptic Entropy and the absence of sloth of luddite sorrow. The eschatological space in *Gravity's Rainbow* is at once historical, theoretical, and fictitious. At the backdrop of the Second World War, the rhetoric of the fable of apocalypse excavates the luddite status quo in favour of exploitation which is found on the absence of the sloth of the luddite sorrow. Novel opens at the fag-end of the World War II. The screams of the post-impact of the crash of V-2 rocket in London begins the novel. A nuclear missile careens down towards a Los Angeles movie theatre. A thirty year of trajectory of Rocket 00000 constitutes the fable of apocalypse. However, the novel is not a literalistic account of nuclear war. The novel is the best illustration of Fredric Jameson's term, "high tech paranoia." Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* forecast's Nietzsche's theories about Power.

Blicero is one of the counterforce characters that withstand the invisible superior force of imperialism and authoritarianism. He is a SS officer and knows by heart and mind the transcendental and omniscient mechanism of special death. No doubt Slothrop is the connecting character in the novel. The map of his erotic encounters maps the apocalypse. However he is paranoid as Oedipa Mass. On the other end masochistic characters Blicero, Brigadier Pudding, Gottfried, and Margherita form the avengers' team. However, these characters commonly choose sado-masochism but act independently, unlike the avengers of *Avengers* movie. Blicero is in-charge of the nuclear missile Rocket that might reveal the historically awaited apocalypse. He is an aging SS officer. The system of imperialism and apocalypse wants only young men. The male out of youth like Blicero are indiscriminately and coldly expelled from the system. Blicero is on the edge of losing his role of consolation in the system of imperial power. Disgruntled Blicero launches the Rocket in such a way that its apocalyptic impact hangs in transcendence. Now does not it surprise us? Blicero's protest act of Rocket launch still serves the purpose of the imperialist. The Rocket crashes and is suspending in the space. "And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 775). The apocalyptic threat still lingers on the novel, by the end of it. There is another aspect of Rocket. He executes his revenge when he eliminated a child system. Gottfried, the fertility of the child is bound to the rocket. His death is absolute. Symbolically, Gottfried's death eradicated the base of the system of the propaganda of apocalypse. The future child who will be automatically enslaved in the prevailing system is prevented from landing into the hands of the imperialist. By the end of the novel, the rhetoric survives but the target of the rhetoric, the Child is destroyed. The Child is the corner stone of the imperial mechanism of exploitation. As the Child is removed from the future the imperial system is blasted at its bottom.

Gravity's Rainbow, exploits the rhetoric of apocalypse of the imperialism to unmask its murderous exploitation and suppression of human mind. The apocalypse of luddite status quo in favour of capitalistic authoritarianism is essence of the novel. The chapter elaborately discussed Pynchon's article on Luddites and drew attention to Pynchon's views on apocalypse. In simple terms apocalypse, in the interpretation of Pynchon, is omniscient exploitation. According to Pynchon the apocalypse is the helplessness of the conscious people who could decrypt the dangerous consequences of irrational technological advancement under the command of the capitalists. To be conscious of the said phenomenon is being luddite, asserts Pynchon in his article on Luddite. The characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* have become, if not conscious, aware about the dangerous impacts of nuclear missiles and molecular biology. The inference is the Sado-masochistic characters – Blicero, Pudding, Gottfried, and Margherita are luddites. Being the luddites of technological era they use the same technology which the imperialistic powers use to suppress and kill them to revenge their agony. By doing so, they resemble the Avengers Team in the *Avengers* movie. As I have argued in the first half of my article, Avengers are the luddite who fight the technologically equipped power mongers so that their hierarchy headed by Captain America shall be the new hierarchy of discrimination. The *Avengers* movie wins the soft power over the international audience which helps to expand the market for the American Capitalists. Similarly, the Avengers teams of *Gravity's Rainbow* revenge the imperialist to replace them as the chiefs of power. The radical self sacrifice of the characters sprouts from their desire. The self sacrifice is meant not for liberation of the subjugated. Hence, luddite status quo in the novel is tilted towards the prevailing paradoxical paranoia.

The avengers' team of *Gravity's Rainbow* could not rise above their selfish motives as they are in want of sloth of luddite sorrow. Pynchon's novels are compendium of contemporary times and sentiments. Does anyone say that there is no trace of humanity among humans? Only imperialists want us to believe in that, not Pynchon. Therefore, *Vineland*, his fourth novel, recovers the hippie ideals. Zoyd Wheeler is a true luddite character in the literary output of Pynchon. Zoyad considers himself as Bigfoot, a hairy human of the primitive times. He has the sloth of the luddite sorrow. This character is not brave and cunning as Blicero. Yet his conscience directed him on the path of humanity and simple protest against the authoritarianism. He preferred poverty over betrayal of his love for his kind. Zoyad lives on a pension and meager mount earned from pot weed. He does not succumb to the political, social and financial pressures of the society. He is materially poor, and spiritually rich. Humanity is the ability to love. He has staunch faith in love. He believes that love can conquer anything in the human world. He is a sloth by the standards of the prevailing system. He suffers from the poverty and police torture. They fail to bring him around and lick the boots of authority. He revolted against the system in his own hazy way, at his individual level. Zoyad Wheeler is only the character who takes comfort in the Byron's luddite song which opens this chapter.

Thus bear a sloth of luddite sorrow reflects the alive sense in humans. It is the only form of resistance might be possible by an average citizen. Thomas Pynchon is hailed as singular writer for displaying super human intellectual clarity he has and the deft way he kits together the tapestry of human condition in the presence.

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