

Postmodernism and the Technological Imagination

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Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk, by Joseph Tabbi. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995. 243 pp. \$35.

Joseph Tabbi's *Postmodern Sublime* is an intelligent, well-written and learned exposition of the impact of modern advances in technology on the works of a number of important American postmodernist writers. In particular, Tabbi draws upon the category of the sublime (especially as delineated by Thomas Weiskel) to provide a framework within which to discuss the ways writers like Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy and Don DeLillo attempt to "reflect imaginatively" on a modern technological world that has become too complex for direct representation. But Tabbi usefully insists that in these writers this impossibility of adequate representation does not result in a reflexive inward turn toward textual play, but in an intense engagement with contemporary reality. Indeed, Tabbi himself characterizes his book in the preface as "a critical investigation of (and occasional polemic on behalf of) a contemporary literary *realism*, one whose psychology expresses itself in the material constructions of an emerging technological reality" (x). Because of the complexity of this "realism," however, the representation of technological reality in these writers must go far beyond the mere use of technological jargon or description of technological devices. It must convey the sense of an entire worldview fundamentally informed by the constant presence of technology in our lives.

In the two chapters on Mailer, Tabbi focuses respectively on *Of a Fire on the Moon* (Mailer's documentary account of the Apollo 11 flight) and on *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* He thus juxtaposes two of Mailer's better-known novels with a relatively little-known (compared, say, to *The Armies of the Night* or *The Executioner's Song*) example of Mailer's semi-journalistic writing to provide some new perspectives on the impact of modern technology on Mailer's writing. Tabbi begins with the obvious importance of technology in the Apollo 11 book and moves to a demonstration of the relevance of technology as an intertext to Mailer's writing even when that relevance is not obvious at all. Meanwhile, Tabbi argues the

importance of romanticism as a background to Mailer's explorations of the tribulations of postmodern selfhood, concluding that the category of the sublime provides a valuable way of conceptualizing Mailer's sense of the diminishment of the self in the face of the sheer magnitude and power of contemporary technology, a power Mailer valiantly struggles against through a "rhetoric of opposition" that seems founded in an almost desperate attempt to recover a romantic vision of the self. As Tabbi points out, this rhetoric in Mailer can probably be traced at least partly to the political movements of the 1960s, but may ultimately fail because of its insistence on creating a direct opposition between individual desire and technological reality. Indeed, Tabbi argues that Mailer himself, in his later work, turns away from this opposition and seeks "a resisting style that is integral rather than oppositional" (182).

Pynchon sometimes sets up similar oppositions between self and society, but with a greater sense of irony and less focus on the individual ego. For most readers, Pynchon is probably the most obvious choice for inclusion in a book of this kind, which may account for the fact that the chapters on Pynchon provide less in the way of genuinely new insights than do the chapters on the other writers. Here, however, I should confess a personal prejudice: having myself spent nearly fifteen years as a professional research engineer, I have always been struck by how little Pynchon's work reminded me of the kinds of thought I was accustomed to encounter in my engineering work. Accordingly, I have long been leery (and weary) of critical proclamations of the astounding extent to which Pynchon is able to incorporate technological ideas and methods into his fiction. For me, popular culture is a far more important factor in Pynchon's writing, and I must say I was somewhat disappointed at Tabbi's lack of attention to popular culture in his Pynchon chapters—and in the book as a whole. In addition, I simply disagree with some of Tabbi's interpretations of Pynchon, as when he argues that in *Gravity's Rainbow* the "paranoid plot-makings attributed to the catchall terms 'Them' and 'the Firm' are less successful, and generally less important, than are the more particular forms and methods of control that modern technology instills in us all but that are most concretely expressed in the novel in the working lives of scientists and engineers" (89). I also think Tabbi's apparent belief that *Vineland* shows Pynchon's "'return home' to family life" as a locus of resistance to technological totalitarianism fails to appreciate the extent to which Pynchon's ironic treatment of this theme finally identifies the family as one of the more dangerous and sinister forms of control in modern society. Nevertheless, despite a tendency (common in Pynchon criticism) to

conflate science and technology (which are very different discourses and operate according to very different premises), Tabbi's discussion of Pynchon and technology is considerably more helpful (and sophisticated) than most. For one thing, he quite appropriately focuses more on the impact of technological structures of thought on Pynchon's style and technique than on the various allusions to science and technology sprinkled throughout Pynchon's texts. Tabbi notes, for example, that "the very *processes* of Pynchon's language parallel and reproduce the reality implied by the forms of modern science" (112).

The chapters on McElroy may be the most useful of the entire book, if only because McElroy's work has received relatively little critical attention (and is relatively seldom read or taught) compared to the work of the other three writers on whom Tabbi focuses. Tabbi presents *Plus* and *Women and Men* in ways that might greatly help to illuminate these difficult texts for those who have attempted to read them and that might make the texts seem worth reading to those who haven't. Tabbi's main thesis is that McElroy's writing, far from opposing literature to science or technology, shows "language and technology as collaborative though independent modes of thought, both of which carry and embody power" (131). He places his readings of McElroy within a number of recent postmodern debates, but concludes that McElroy's work, as an example of "sublime failure" to represent a reality that inherently goes beyond language, may have more in common with Wordsworth's *Prelude* than with either modernism or postmodernism.

Tabbi's long chapter on DeLillo focuses on *Libra* and *Mao II* to demonstrate his thesis that DeLillo's work, while often formally inventive in a way reminiscent of predecessors like Pynchon, is better understood as a sort of "postmodern naturalism" that attempts to convey as precisely as possible the status of reality in a postmodern age. Again, Tabbi's argument is that this naturalism should be understood more as a mimesis of certain technological processes than as a direct representation of the "social and political order" (200). DeLillo thus becomes a crucial marker of Tabbi's point that the writers in this study avoid the conventional romantic notion that art and technology are fundamentally opposed and recognize that, in our postmodern age, one must speak within technology or not at all.

Tabbi's epilogue focuses on cyberpunk fiction, paying particular attention to the work of William Gibson and to the appropriation of Gibson's work by Kathy Acker. For Tabbi, cyberpunk is the logical extension of the works of the other four writers he discusses and thus can be considered the realization of an aesthetic toward which Mailer, Pynchon, McElroy and DeLillo are only beginning to point. As Tabbi

colorfully puts it, "The difference between cyberpunk and its postmodern textualist predecessors is the difference, in the aesthetic sphere, between paper science and lab science, ideal and practical reason, the material advance of current computer technologies and the previous generation's heady theory" (210). For Tabbi, cyberpunk (as for Fredric Jameson) thus becomes the ultimate literary expression of the postmodern condition. In particular, Tabbi sees cyberpunk as the inevitable (sublime) form realism must take to engage a postmodern reality that is inherently unrepresentable.

Tabbi's book is particularly distinguished by his impressive knowledge of the works of the four principal writers he discusses, and it is an extremely useful contribution to our ongoing attempts to understand the phenomenon of postmodernism. On the other hand, the book may be more valuable for its insights into individual writers than for its vision of postmodernism as a whole. For one thing, the focus on advances in science and (particularly) technology as the major determinants of postmodern culture, while lending his argument an admirable coherence, sometimes seems a bit partial and forced. For another, Tabbi misses some golden opportunities to place his argument within a broader cultural context, as when he fails to note that his vision radically challenges the New Critical notion that poetry and science are Manichean opposites. Tabbi also often fails to consider alternative explanations of some of the phenomena he attributes to the impact of technology on modern writing. Many textual features (mixture of genres, combination of discourses from different disciplines, etc.) Tabbi consistently sees as a reflection of the technological imagination can be found in literature that goes back thousands of years and can be described (and explained) in other ways, such as through an appeal to Bakhtin's descriptions of Menippean satire and dialogism in the novel. Thus Tabbi dismisses the attempt to understand the intense heteroglossia of Pynchon's texts through an appeal to an encyclopedic impulse as arising from a desire "to claim Pynchon for a recognizably *literary* tradition at any cost" (103). One might, of course, say the same thing for Tabbi's attempt to claim Pynchon and the other writers in this study for technology, but what is more important is that, read through Bakhtin, Pynchon's encyclopedic impulse is not primarily literary, but social, political and historical.

Herein, in fact, lies the major shortcoming of Tabbi's book. Despite his disavowal of reflexive textualism and his consistent gestures toward engagement with social and historical reality, Tabbi ultimately (perhaps because of his focus on science and technology) fails to present a coherent political or historical vision. For example, technology has a different meaning for white, middleclass men than for those

placed differently in our society, but, oddly enough, neither race nor class really figures into Tabbi's political vision. His lack of historical sense shows up in a number of ways, most obviously in his rather too comfortable application of the romantic category of the sublime to the literature of a decidedly postromantic historical era. Indeed, if Tabbi sometimes conflates romanticism and postmodernism, he also tends to assume that any writer at any time can choose to write in any mode he pleases. Tabbi's critical terminology thus gets slippery at times, as when he conflates terms like realism and naturalism, which in any properly historical vision of literature must surely be distinguished. It is symptomatic in this sense that someone like Georg Lukács, who has elaborated so vividly the historical movement from realism to naturalism to modernism, would go unmentioned in Tabbi's study. Moreover, the absence of Lukács is only one example of a relative lack of engagement throughout Tabbi's book with a number of more genuinely political theoretical treatments of literary history and postmodernism. Donna Haraway is used to good measure at some points, but gender—like race and class—never becomes much of an issue for Tabbi, even in his discussion of Acker's dialogue with Gibson, which fails to address the problematic treatment of gender in Gibson as discussed by Andrew Ross and others. (The discussion of Acker and Gibson, by the way, would be very usefully supplemented by an acknowledgement of Marge Piercy's use of Gibson in *He, She, It*, or by a discussion of feminist works like Joanna Russ's *Female Man*.) Despite Tabbi's frequent nods toward the topics of power and resistance, Foucault is absent from his argument, except for a fleeting mention that dismisses his work as unnecessary to consider, and de Certeau is absent altogether. Habermas never appears, and theorists like Slavoj Žižek, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno are mentioned only fleetingly, mostly in the introduction.

Of course, no one can include everything in any book, so the most serious problem with *Postmodern Sublime* may not be its failure to address certain theorists but its sometimes superficial use of theorists whose work it does address. For example, the frequent references to Bakhtin have a tacked-on quality, and the implications of Bakhtin's work don't seem to have had much influence on Tabbi's conclusions. Even more telling is Tabbi's lack of real engagement with Jameson's work, which is mentioned especially often (sometimes critically, sometimes in support of Tabbi's own arguments), but which deserves some more thought. For one thing, all the substantive references to Jameson are to the 1984 essay "Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." The crucial 1991 book by the same title is mentioned only through one brief (and misleading, as it turns out)

quotation in Tabbi's introduction, and Jameson's other books and essays on postmodern culture are ignored entirely. More important, Tabbi never acknowledges the intensely historical sense Jameson brings to all his work.

Tabbi provides a clue to the reason for his relatively superficial engagement with Jameson when he argues in his introduction that Mailer and the other writers he considers do not tend to think dialectically, while Jameson always does. Tabbi also wants to argue that the complexities of the problem he discusses cannot be comprehended by dialectical thought or by "a single theoretical framework such as Jameson's Marxism" (24). Yet the inability of postmodern writers to think dialectically is one of Jameson's central points in his own discussions of such writers. Meanwhile, Tabbi never demonstrates the inadequacy of the dialectic, and Jameson's exquisitely complex version of Marxist thought is surely more powerful and multifaceted than Tabbi's comparatively narrow focus on technology. Tabbi's rejection of Marxism and his concomitant vision of modern history as driven by technological advances allow him to avoid genuinely political explanations and thus seem, in subtle but important ways, informed by a lingering Cold-War horror of communism (or, alternatively, of politics in general). The same might be said for his fascination with the sublime, a quintessentially bourgeois category, or for his ending his book with a sentimental liberal humanist paean to the powers of the novel to continue emotionally to "move" readers despite the inability of the postmodern novel directly to represent reality in its totality. In this sense, of course, Tabbi's work is no different from most literary criticism (and theory) being produced today, even by those who would loudly proclaim themselves "political." The failure of this immensely intelligent and learned book to get beyond the confines of bourgeois ideology (or even Cold-War propaganda) may, in fact, be one of its most important lessons, but only if we are willing to learn it.

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