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Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk

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Preface

The literary criticism of the past few decades, at least in the United States, has inclined toward partial and minimalist forms; it has afforded little room for the un-ironic, expansive gestures that are traditionally associated with the sublime. Equating master narratives, and total conceptual systems of any kind, with political totalitarianism, literary theorists have never been comfortable with writers who speak directly to power. At most, the sublime is allowed to survive today as one critical category among many, as an avant-garde "aesthetic" (Lyotard, "Question" 77) or as a stylistic register in exceptional, "energetic postmodern texts" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 79), not the least of which are certain texts of postmodern theory.

Despite this critical circumspection, however, the sublime persists as a powerful emotive force in postmodern writing, especially in American works that regard reality as something newly mediated, predominantly, by science and technology. Kant's sublime object, a figure for an infinite greatness and infinite power in nature that cannot be represented, seems to have been replaced in postmodern literature by a technological process. Now, when literature fails to present an object for an idea of absolute power, the failure is associated with technological structures and global corporate systems beyond the comprehension of any one mind or imagination. "Our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network," writes Fredric Jameson, "are themselves but a distorted figuration of something deeper, namely the whole world system of present-day multi-

national capitalism" ("Postmodernism" 79).[1] Jean-François Lyotard, for his part, identifies the pleasure that can derive from the pain of such representational insufficiency as *the* postmodern emotion, a "sentiment of the sublime" that is no less paradoxical than the term *postmodernism* itself ("Question" 77).

The emergence of science and technology has put to flight former metaphysical, religious, and political certainties. As a result, according to Lyotard, we must accept the fragmentation of reality into a set of competing or collaborating "language games." Literature and science in this state of affairs are to be considered alternative constructions or "discourse systems," neither of which should be privileged as a way of knowing. For knowledge to be legitimate, it will have to be local and circumscribed, aware of its own limitations, and suspicious of the global knowledge sought by traditional science. This "incredulity" toward grand narratives will protect us from the illusion that we can "seize reality"; it will "let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" ("Question" 82).

For obvious reasons this account of contemporary reality as a linguistic construct has been influential in the humanities, though not especially conducive to their communication with the sciences. I am not working to bring about a common understanding between the two disciplines here, but I do hope to describe the sublime encounter between contemporary literature and science. Downplaying the paradoxes and distancing ironies that both terms of my title seem to invite, I offer *Postmodern Sublime* 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. The postmodern texts I have selected are challenging in their promise of an affirmative answer to the question that Lyotard and most other constructivist critics never quite get around to asking: With the loss of an absolute standard of reality (assuming such a standard ever existed), and in the absence of metaphysical foundations and former certainties (including the certainty that there is a "nature" that can be represented), have science and technology themselves become means—however "painfully inadequate"—of pre-

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1. On the complex sublimity of Jameson's own expression in this passage, the locus classicus of the postmodern sublime, see Redfield (152).

senting the unpresentable, the mind's relation to "the totality of what is" ("Question" 78)?

I concentrate on contemporary novelists—Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, Don DeLillo, and their cyberpunk successors—who invoke the sublime as more than a nostalgic romanticism. Participants in a powerful countercurrent in twentieth-century American writing (running from Henry Adams to Kathy Acker), these writers share an exemplary willingness to push beyond the limits of the literary, to bring their writing into contact with a nonverbal technological reality. The sublime has always located itself between discrete orders of meaning. It is not a category in itself so much as a term that describes what cannot be categorized, and the writers it claims cannot be held to any one literary genre. Thus Adams, in a narrative that is at once a history, an autobiography, and a scientific dissertation, speaks of having been born between two worlds or histories, namely, the idealist eighteenth century of his founding American ancestors and an emerging twentieth-century culture of technological multiplicity. Adams's ambivalence persists in successors as different from one another as Mailer and Donna Haraway, both of whom can be understood (though certainly not reconciled to each other) from a double perspective—that of the romantic sublime and postmodern literary theory.

Like the technological aesthetic it takes as its subject, this book has been of necessity eclectic in its methods, ad hoc and even tendentious in bringing together narrative elements that may well be incompatible. Eric Werner, one of the "Indigo Engineers" interviewed by the novelist William T. Vollmann, speaks of the engineer's need to recycle the products of previous work in constructing a new "machine sculpture," in this case a monstrous hybrid of scrap metal and simulated (or deadly real) organic matter: "Everything I make is a version of something that already exists," says Werner (Vollmann 460). The same can be said of this book, in its use of my own and others' work. Certain sentences and paragraphs may have survived from as far back as my undergraduate days, larger segments from graduate school. Intermediate versions of chapters have appeared in the following journals: portions of Chapter 1 in "Mailer's Psychology of Machines," *PMLA* (March 1991): 238–50; parts of Chapter 3 in " 'Strung into the Apollonian Dream': Pynchon's Psychology of Engineers," *Novel* (Winter 1992): 160–80; and portions of Chapter 4 in "The Wind at Zwölfkinder: Technology and Personal Identity in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Pynchon Notes* (Spring/Fall 1987): 69–90.

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I am concerned in this book with four of those "most energetic" and ambitious prose writers of recent decades who have sought in their work, in the full knowledge of the impossibility of their task, to reflect imaginatively on the whole of American technological culture (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 79). These writers carry on both the romantic tradition of the sublime and the naturalist ambition of social and scientific realism, but in a postmodern culture that no longer respects romantic oppositions between mind and machine, organic nature and human construction, metaphorical communication and the technological transfer of information. The unprecedented potential for science and technology to assist forms of social, political, and economic control—so often the occasion for an eloquent literary resistance— has at the same time made technology itself a powerful mode of representation. The image of the machine presents faceless and impersonal forces that seem to conflict with the human imagination, but that in their abstraction and precision can also call us outside ourselves. A simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology, a complex pleasure derived from the pain of representational insufficiency, has paradoxically produced one of the most powerful modes of modern writing in America—a technological sublime that may be located, conceptually and temporally, between Henry Adams's *Education* and Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto."

One sentence in particular from the *Education*, in "A Dynamic Theory of History," will serve to introduce the multiple contradictions inherent in any attempt to present the technological culture in its totality:

"The universe that had formed him took shape in his mind as a re-flection of his own unity, containing all forces except himself" (475). Adams is here referring to the human being at the earliest stage of self-awareness, to the necessary completion of our primal "education"— the mind's evolution as a recording apparatus—before any historical record can have begun. But the sentence also indicates the imagina-tion's simultaneous separation from and participation in the physical universe, the necessity of its being at once outside and inside its own representations. The sublime emotion before the mystery of the uni-verse is not necessarily that of romantic transcendence, nor is Adams at this moment the romantic figure of the alienated artist individually opposing an objective and impersonal science. Rather, he comes to a self-knowledge that is often explicitly linked to contemporary devel-opments in science, especially the new physics of X rays, statistical thermodynamics, and nuclear radiation. What was true for the writer and artist would be true for the scientist: any representation of the new forces must both contain and exclude the mind of the person repre-senting them; the human subject, inseparable though it may be from the outside world that constitutes it, cannot be integrated into its own symbolic construction of the world.[1]

This is more than an abstract problem in the metaphysics of repre-sentation. Adams's self-consciousness reveals the specific situation of an early modernist writer who finds himself separated from the domi-nant energies of his age, and who must live in an ever more secular culture amid technological forces and emerging corporate systems too complex for any single mind or imagination to know or experience di-rectly. Writing in 1905, the year in which Einstein published his first papers in what were to become the fields of relativity and quantum me-chanics, Adams could only anticipate a period marked at every level by discontinuity, when uncertainty would enter into our most fundamen-tal representations of matter and force. Yet Adams had determined, in the face of this uncertainty, to measure all "supersensual" forces, whether physical or historical, by "their attraction on his own mind.

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1. W. S. Wilson comments: "The interest of [Adams's] sentence is that the writer or artist has represented the universe as a whole, but the act of representation leaves the artist out of the whole. The problem . . . is that our representations of physi-cal forces don't seem containable within those forces . . . even as the theory of the physicist might not include the working of the brain conceiving that theory" ("Joseph McElroy and Field").

He must treat them as they had been felt; as convertible, reversible, interchangeable attractions on thought" (383).

Not until the mid-1970s, when Joseph McElroy figured the literal growth of a human mind in space, would American fiction get around to exploring the complex self-consciousness within modern science and reflecting that complexity in its form. The appearance of a writer such as McElroy, however, had to wait for the materialization of the scientific worldview, for a moment when technology would make possible transcendence in its digital electronic matrices, in vast computer, transportation, and information networks, and in weightless environments in space and behind the screen of the computer, whose capacity to "translate us toward forms more cerebral" may have had the unforeseen salutary effect, as McElroy remarks in "Holding with *Apollo 17*," of making us *more* aware of our bodies (29). Similarly, when Norman Mailer confronted space technologies directly in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, he claimed to have experienced "a loss of ego" (3), a feeling of dread, disembodiment, and conceptual indeterminacy which he then projected onto the very mechanisms of the *Apollo 11* rocket. Mailer's psychologizing of the machine in *Fire*—a tour de force of metaphorical distortion and transformation—is one way to repair the ego loss that accompanies the loss of "metaphysical, religious, and political certainties" (Lyotard, "Question" 77). Rather than seek some new stability in science or "some virtue of vision" in technology itself (McElroy, "*Apollo 17*" 27), Mailer undermines a science he perceives as monolithic and irresolvably Other; better yet, he assimilates this otherness into his own consciousness, translating technology's mechanical repetitions and otherwise meaningless simulations into a reproductive dream space "where one was his own hero" (*Fire* 160).

Autobiography, and the projection of the self and its immediate sense experience into an autonomous sphere of thought, are continuing responses to scientific indeterminacy and accelerated technological change. Ultimately, however, all such attempts at literary self-creation and technological transcendence must appear quixotic. For just as Adams could not integrate his own mind into the conceptual universe of contemporary science, technology cannot be integrated fully into the mind's symbolic universe. As Haraway would point out in her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), the machine is "not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream" ("Manifesto" 152).

The human subject, for its part, has become a "monstrous" nongen-

dered hybrid whose symbolizations exceed all binary categories that separate the human from the mechanical. The subject is now a cyborg, "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" that is never whole or natural or innocent, and is not for a moment taken in by "seductions to organic wholeness" such as "bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, and unalienated labor"—in all senses of the word ("Manifesto" 163, 150).

Typically, the romantic male ego has appropriated the force and terror of woman's labor to itself, as in Adams's famous conversion from the reproductive labor of the virgin to the productive labor of the dynamo. A monstrous birth engendered through technology shows up at the end of *The Armies of the Night,* in Mailer's metaphor of America itself as a woman about to give birth: "and to what?—the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known?" (316) In every case the detached male ego tries to achieve embodiment through a maternal Other, whose reproductive force is conceived in opposition to the technological absolute.[2] (Doubly disturbing for Mailer, then, is the prospect of women joining *with* technology in their own efforts at liberation, a prospect that haunts him throughout *The Prisoner of Sex.*)

Haraway's radicalism lies precisely in her rejection of this "masculinist reproductive dream" (although she does not go so far as Patricia Yeager, who imagines the labor of giving birth as itself the foundation of a "maternal sublime" capable of displacing transcendent, disembodied versions of the masculine sublime). Embodiment for Haraway is technological; the machine is the replicative force behind social institutions and is thus a powerful ally against transcendental romanticism in all of its forms. But hers is necessarily a *partial* alliance, limited to local interventions in the present technological order and forever "ironical" in its efforts at self-creation. The cyborg would resist all totalizing dynamics as well as the more futile strategies of literary opposition; it would allow no system to dominate everything, no dialectic or "final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" ("Manifesto" 150). But Haraway's resulting commitment to a world constructed of localized "differences" does not prevent the continued construction of total systems and the transcendental subject; and the assertion of difference has scarcely affected the prestige that

2. Yeager understands Mailer's metaphor of the woman in labor as representing "a force that is unstoppable and awesome, even as she yields in the final paragraph to the exhortations of male power" (18). Mailer calls out to the Vietnam war protesters to "'rush to the locks' [*Armies* 317], to surmount the terror of the unruly body-politic that his laboring woman represents" (17).

a mostly monolithic science continues to enjoy. The cyborg is a product of global technology after all, and any local difference it makes can scarcely be expected to alter this global context.

Haraway herself admits as a " 'final' irony" (the scare quotes are hers) the possibility that "the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space" (150–51). And at times it is difficult to separate the most oppositional of romantic self-projections from the transcendental dreams of technology itself. Consider, for example, a statement by the German rocket engineer Wernher von Braun, cited by Thomas Pynchon as an epigraph to the first section of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1). Mailer, too, had come across a variation of this statement—he circled it and underlined it twice—in a NASA press release during the week of the *Apollo 11* launch.[3] Both novelists obviously share von Braun's concern with ideas of continuity, Mailer in his ceaseless imaginings of "death as a continuation, a migration, a metamorphosis" (*Cannibals and Christians* 325), and Pynchon in his attempt to imagine all aspects of organized human activity, be they scientific, political, economic, aesthetic, or sociological, as capable of being transmuted somehow to a psychic world "beyond the Zero" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 1). However ironically such deathless projections are to be taken, they nonetheless reveal the writer's necessary complicity in the construction, and a new legitimation, of the technological culture.

There are of course obvious difficulties with von Braun's dream of "continuity," for it depends on an uncritical transference of a technological worldview (which is questionable in itself) to a wholly separate

3. NASA press releases and flight transcripts may be found in abundance among Mailer's papers, which he keeps stored in a warehouse on East Sixty-second Street in New York. I was allowed access to these papers through the courtesy of Robert Lucid, Mailer's archivist and biographer. The von Braun quotation is from Simon and Schuster's *Third Book of Words to Live By* (1962), a volume that was widely quoted by NASA during the month of the first moon launch (July 1969). On the opening page of the von Braun press release Mailer has underlined the sentence "Immortality is a continuity of our spiritual existence after death." The circled passage appears on page 3. Those sentences that Mailer underlined read: "Nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, can disappear without a trace. Nature does not know extinction, all it knows is transformation. If God applies this fundamental principle to the most minute and insignificant parts of his universe, it just does not make sense to assume that he would not apply it to the masterpiece of his creation, the human soul."

realm of experience—the development of a conscious human life. The engineer treats life not as a form but as an accumulated sum, where "nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, can disappear without a trace" (von Braun press release 3). But what of the organizational process that gives the particles direction and significance, whether one chooses to conceive of such activity as a traditional teleology, the work of an all-knowing and prescient god, or the self-organizing activity that is thought to characterize living systems in nature? Related to this more or less formal difficulty is a rhetoric that can scarcely stand up to the most basic political scrutiny. For, contrary to the comforting statement given out for publication at the launch of *Apollo 11*, the technological future that von Braun himself had worked to realize could hardly have grown out of an objective lesson taught by science, any more than his past career as the leading engineer at the Peenemünde rocket facility would have been possible had he continued alone in a youthful apolitical quest for knowledge.[4]

I mention these historical and biographical details not to pass judgment on von Braun's—or Walter Dornberger's or (in light of recently declassified British Intelligence documents) Werner Heisenberg's— complicity in, and later silence on the subject of, Nazi crimes.[5] Any denunciation of a fifty-year-old evil, coming from an American born two full generations after von Braun, would be facile at best; at worst it might obscure the quite different technological and market relations that have come to be perceived by many as comprehensive and all-powerful today. The form of postmodern domination (what Slavoj Žižek might term the "sublime object of ideology") tends to manifest

4. After the Second World War, engineers such as von Braun and his superior, General Walter Dornberger, were clearly anxious to downplay their role in German political history. For example, only once in his 1954 memoir does Dornberger mention the "foreign laborers" at Peenemünde, not as the German Jews and Russian prisoners of war who were forced, under his command and in deadly conditions, to labor on the V-2 rocket, but as the apparently expendable group whose barracks suffered the most damage in the Allied bombing of the rocket works. Molly Hite notes Dornberger's omission in *Ideas of Order* (148), and Steven Weisenburger documents Pynchon's Peenemünde source material in *A "Gravity's Rainbow" Companion*.

5. Heisenberg and nine other nuclear scientists were held for questioning after the Allied troops occupied Germany, and their private conversations were recorded by British eavesdroppers and eventually published as the "Farm Hall Transcripts" in 1992. In a review of these transcripts David Hollinger writes, "Although the transcripts contain a handful of direct references to Nazi atrocities, Nazism figures in these pages more as an inconvenience than a crime," so caught up were these men in scientific professionalism and nationalism. Hollinger excepts only "the legendary anti-Nazi von Laue," but not Heisenberg (32).

itself not in offensive individual attitudes that are easy to denounce, but in large forces of corporate organization that control the social and economic relations among human beings. Such domination should not be imagined as producing a "false consciousness" in its subjects or distorted representation that hides the truth behind misleading appearances; nor should we suspect a technocratic elite or overt censor of attempting to impose compliance "from above" on a deluded majority. As Noam Chomsky has pointed out, the majority nowadays are rather more likely to be influenced by an "elite consensus" of right-thinking people more or less like anyone else, but reinforced in their rhetorical stance by sophisticated (and, for most people, hardly perceptible) techniques of media persuasion, statistical analysis, and "public opinion" control.[6]

The most effective and potentially dangerous ideological force *at this moment* is to be found in those things we do every day to sustain the technological culture, whether what we do is explicitly technological or not, unconscious and internalized or, if conscious, sweetened with a suitably hip postmodern irony. For it is true that most individuals— at least those with any real economic power or professional calling to political articulateness—have become far too sophisticated to be caught out in earlier forms of false consciousness. This sophistication and a new self-censorship may explain why the same self-conscious irony that helped make for such all-embracing social and political criticisms in *Gravity's Rainbow* has by now frustrated any direct political opposition, as Pynchon's 1990 novel *Vineland* all too clearly shows. The internalization of dominant systems of oppression had its classic American expression, independently of Michel Foucault's prison book (and four years before that book's appearance in English), in this universalizing sentence from *Gravity's Rainbow*: "The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local

6. In *Manufacturing Consent* Chomsky writes: "Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements, and by people at higher levels who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power" (300). Christopher Norris, in *Uncritical Theory*, discusses the (superficial) similarities of this conception to Michel Foucault's postmodern theories of the internalization of contemporary forces of "power/knowledge" (100–121). The crucial difference between Foucault and Chomsky is that the latter does *not* perceive this process as total and ineluctable.

rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit" (712–13). By the time of *Vineland* this essentially psychological model of power had been *externalized* and made automatic by advances in information technologies. As one character points out (in a cynical rationalization of his own compromises and betrayals of his former revolutionary ideals): "Everybody's a squealer. We're in th' Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you're tellin' the Man more than you meant to. Don't matter if it's big or small, he can use it all" (74).

In both quotations Pynchon is concerned with the absorption of alternative and oppositional tendencies by established systems of domination; both present power, and "our" complicity in it, as something total.[7] One strength of *Gravity's Rainbow* was its use of irony to cut through the hypocrisy and false consciousness of a conformist generation that had (in the eyes of many sixties radicals) repressed most personal knowledge of the way power gets internalized. But in *Vineland* irony is now used, by this very hip character and his wife, Frenesi Gates, to *support* the dominant system, to legitimate a world in which complicity is assured through technology, not psychology. If "everybody's a squealer," and everybody *knows* it, then irony itself becomes the dominant cultural attitude, part of the political problem, not the solution, and a hindrance—on the aesthetic level—to any attempt to ground fiction in some shared "human reality" and in a psychological authenticity, which Pynchon feels to be missing in some of his undergraduate fiction, "found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live" (*Slow Learner* 18, 21).

To a novelist of the generation after Pynchon's such as David Fos-

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7. This is the totalizing viewpoint, of course, of only one character in *Vineland*, and not an especially sympathetic character at that. In the novel as a whole, as Molly Hite has shown, "complicity is not by definition total and does not by definition rule out resistance" ("Feminist Theory" 148). Hite is responding in part to my own review of *Vineland*, in which I charged Pynchon (in terms that were surely too sweeping) with failing to resist the commercialized American culture of simulation that is his subject in the novel ("Pynchon's Groundward Art"). Hite offers a convincing account of an alternative "political sensibility" in *Vineland*, "one that tacitly acknowledges the possibility of bad faith in subsuming considerations of exploitation to considerations of mortality" ("Feminist Theory" 148). There can be no resistance when "the Man" sits in each of us as absolutely as death. Thus, what I initially understood as a failed resistance might be better seen as an attempt by Pynchon to imagine a strategy of *disinternalization*, one that remains critical but refuses to meet power on its own ground, even to oppose it.

ter Wallace, self-consciousness and postmodern irony, though once "useful for debunking illusions," have by now become "poisonous," at best "a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving" (McCaffery, interview 146, 147). The media culture has absorbed its own strongest critiques, frustrating any direct resistance grounded in traditionalist conceptions of realism and existential authenticity. Pynchon's stated desire for such realism, which has the merit of risking the appearance of naïveté that Wallace feels is needed now, does not free Pynchon from the grip of irony. To function as a mode of social and political critique, irony requires just the foundation Pynchon speaks of in a shared social and psychological reality, a ground from which it can operate and a set of certainties it can then go on to annihilate. In a postmodern period that questions certainties as a matter of course and, in the absence of totalities, fixed values, and absolute conceptual foundations of any sort, irony loses its oppositional force, or is reduced to cynicism and black humor. To adduce further ironies in the context of this postmodern condition is not subversive but redundant.

Žižek speaks for an un-ironic postmodern realism when he argues that "ideological propositions" do not go away simply because people cease to take them seriously (33). His Lacanian analysis of corporate capitalism, in which fantasy is an enabling presence *within* real processes of corporate control and not in the least opposed to them, has much in common with my analysis of an "engineering psychology" undertaken later in this book. There von Braun's dream of immortality will be seen as a fantasy projected onto the very objects and methods of engineering technology, which are in turn imagined to be animate, independent of human control, and capable of an autonomous development after those who created the technology have left the scene. Such a transcendental technology has its economic correlative in the abstract processes of commodity exchange discussed by Žižek, and in a culture where technological advances come to represent advances in consciousness even though such technological processes need not be grasped, and often could not ever *be* grasped, by any one human mind. In both cases individual beliefs and desires externalize themselves in technological inscriptions, and consciousness is delegated to symbolical systems—the "hard" memory of archives and computer networks,