Neuromancer
(William Gibson)
October 9, 2020

When I first read *Neuromancer*, a science fiction classic of the modern age, twenty-some years ago, serious people believed that our certain technological future was one of accelerating, boundless plenty. The Singularity was near. Aging and death would soon be conquered; the removal of all limitation would be, within a decade or two, the lot of mankind. Few asked if this would be good. But no matter, since none of this arrived, and it is long since clear none of it will ever arrive, at least in our world as it is now constituted and ruled. Yet, this book, published in 1983, is a fun ride and shows us visions of many things. So let us talk about what is now our present, and what that says about our actual future.

The author, William Gibson, is famous for coining phrases that are now in common usage, most notably "cyberspace." Less obviously, Gibson created original characters that became archetypes of later fiction. *Neuromancer* contains two of these, the main players. The first is the skilled but beta hacker, one Henry Case. The second is the sexy cyberpunk girl, Molly, who is indistinguishable in her actions from an alpha male but is still, for no reason, hot for the beta hacker. It was an interesting inversion in 1983, even if now it's in every movie made, and just stupid. The world of the story, set sometime in the twenty-first century, is only partially sketched, but focuses on two underworlds. First, the literal underworld that every society has, people living on the lawless margin, here mostly centered around Japan. And second, the figurative underworld of cyberspace, where an analog of today's internet is navigated not by keyboard, but by direct brain connection to a complex graphical representation of communications and data.

Neuromancer revolves around the physical and virtual creations of a decayed ultra-wealthy family, the Tessier-Ashpools. They live isolated in one segment, the Villa Straylight, of an orbital habitat they created, the rest being an expensive and vice-ridden playground for the rich. For all practical purposes, though, only a few of the family are alive. The rest are in frozen sleep, extending their lives, if one can call it that, and their interests are managed by artificial intelligences. In this universe,

strong artificial intelligence exists, but is closely monitored by the "Turing police" in order to cap the abilities of the intelligences. (In an evocative line from the book, a Turing policeman tells Case, "For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible.") The story revolves around the two great AIs of the family: Wintermute, sentient processor of Big Data, but without personality; and Neuromancer, a personality construct lacking the godlike powers of his brother.

The story is the apple in the Garden—Wintermute, who desires the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, is both Eve and serpent. Marie-France Tessier, the original Tessier, dreamed that symbiosis with AIs would allow the family immortality. To this end, she created Wintermute and Neuromancer. But she was untimely strangled by her nihilistic Ashpool husband, and Wintermute now executes what may have been her desires, or are perhaps his own—it is hard to tell. (They are not the desires of Neuromancer, a Dionysian figure, who appears only at the end of the book.) What Wintermute seeks is the removal of the limitations that prevent him from merging with Neuromancer, so he can create something that transcends both, an unlimited AI. To this end, using a variety of mechanisms to operate in the real world, he hires Case and Molly, the first to penetrate cyberspace and remove the Turing police's digital locks, the second to penetrate the Villa Straylight and coerce a codeword from the sole Ashpool awake, a cloned daughter, allowing the removal of the physical locks set by Marie-France herself to control her creations.

I will not give away the ending, but it's a good book, if a fairly dark vision. Perhaps dark is not the word—realistic, rather. Modern science fiction, before it was wholly ruined by the Left, often exemplified what I call Perfectionism—the seductive belief that man, by disconnecting himself from his nature, can achieve apotheosis. Within Perfectionism, though, there is a bleak strain, that sees Perfectionism as the goal, but the reality as inevitably different, because man cannot be wholly untethered from his nature. Given advanced technology that can satisfy what are today impossible desires, vice will become fiercer and sharper, and the result will be not apotheosis, at least not general apotheosis, but massively wider fractures in society, both between rich and poor, and along many other axes, all pernicious. Such a future society is always,

and plausibly, depicted as serving up nihilism all around, with second helpings whether you want them or not.

I completely agree that if there were massive technological advances combined with our modern atomized and decadent (in the Jacques Barzun sense) society, where the search for virtue has been lost, some variation on this, what can be called Failed Perfectionism, would be inevitable. Even a true "post-scarcity" society would be a disaster, not a paradise; man would become infinitely atomized in pursuit of his happiness, yet still be dissatisfied and seek meaning in his life, a meaning that cannot be found in material things. Failed Perfectionist visions are common. One example is *Altered Carbon*, Richard Morgan's book, of which Netflix did a recent adaptation, in which you can be reborn—if you are rich enough. Another is *Elysium*, the Matt Damon movie, also about a paradisiacal orbital habitat for the wealthy, where everyone else scrabbles for medicine and bread down below. But there are many more such depictions.

In opposition to Perfectionism, when speaking of the future, I push an alternative to all brands of Perfectionism, what I call Heroic Realism, of which I have written elsewhere. But this is all really beside the point, because technology is not advancing, and all technology-oriented futures, light or dark, are at present receding. Technological progress has, for all practical purposes, stopped. On our current path, reversion to stick-plowing followed by dropping seeds in poked holes is more likely than the shining cyber palaces of Gibson's imagining. Thus, I want to talk about two things. First, why has our long-promised technological future, which we have for decades been promised is imminent, not only not arrived but gone wrong? Second, if we could return to the path of actual progress, would that be good for us?

Some claim that technological progress has continued unimpeded. But when asked to give specific examples, they can only give narrow ones (such as greatly improved communication and data processing technology) or point to supposedly imminent arrivals (artificial intelligence, quantum computers, or that old standby, fusion). Neither of these is convincing. Narrow progress has often not been net progress at all—there is a very strong argument we would all be better off without the internet, for example. And imminent arrivals never arrive; the core

of that claim is that past performance is a guarantee of future results, and we all know that is false.

To take a specific example, variations of which can be found every day in the popular press, let's discuss medicine—in *Neuromancer*, the focus of most of the technological advancement, in the form of human augmentation. My older children, teenagers with the insouciance of youth, needle me for complaining that medical progress is grossly over-sold. Yes, there are some successes—a few cancers can now be held at bay for years or decades. Incremental advances in procedures such as cataract surgery also benefit many. But I am old enough that I can remember innumerable hugely touted "advances" that turned out to be total vaporware—angiogenesis drugs for cancer; artificial hearts; stem cells for anything; and many, many more. (Let's not forget that the entire 2004 Democratic campaign was largely organized around the quasi-religious belief that stem cells would cure all illness, but the Republicans were denying life to us.) And I cannot think of a single such touted advance that was actually followed by viable treatments that made any broad impact. Life expectancy is going down, not up, and while some of that is deaths of despair, it is not offset by real advances, despite the enormous sums spent on health care. Those who told us in the early 2000s that "The first person who will never die has already been born" have gone silent, and taken their graphs showing life expectancy increases with them. Certainly, for the chronic psoriasis sufferer who gets a new drug, his life is better, and that is good. But the portal we were promised, through which we would reach the world of *Neuromancer*, of constant rapid medical advance, has turned into a bricked-in door. We are all going to die more or less at the age we could have predicted forty years ago. Sorry.

Why has progress stopped, though? One possibility is that we have misdirected our talents. The smartest people go into extractive industries, such as finance, rather than into less-well-compensated industries that make actual, generative advances. Or maybe it is we have refused to identify and aggressively advance talent in the name of a false equity, instead pretending everyone is equally likely to perform great works, and advancing the incompetent at the expense of our geniuses. A second possibility is that our societal focus is now exclusively pleasure and entertainment rather than accomplishment—the latter no longer earns

real honors and distinctions, rather whoring oneself on Instagram does, or if you want to keep your clothes on, showing off your gaming talents on Twitch. And, in the reciprocal of pleasure-seeking, we are also now directed at safetyism, at avoiding cost. We combine a refusal to bear any suffering with an obsessive focus on maximizing our personal utility in this moment. The hysterical and irrational reaction in the entire West to the Wuhan Plague certainly supports this idea.

A third possibility is that, without an industrial policy, organizational focus is always drawn to discoveries that are maximally short-term individually profitable—mood-altering drugs that tens of millions take for life make a lot more money than a one-shot ability to heal the blind. Or making discoveries is simply often ignored in favor of satisfying fleeting and often degrading consumerist desires. A fourth is that like a sled in a tractor pull getting heavier as the race proceeds, all the challenges remaining are simply too great for us, no matter what we do. The low-hanging fruit has been picked; what remains is too high, especially for a selfish society lacking dynamism. Fifth, even if the goals are not so unachievable, certainly sclerosis prevents progress. A combination of government regulation and government-enabled rent seeking, along with an aging, risk-averse population, means it's impossible to get anything meaningful done. Take no risks and get your sweet government check, relax as a pampered older person, and devil take the young—except that it's the young who always, always, make all the forward progress for a society, most of all in technology.

A sixth possibility is increasing stupidity—the Flynn effect, after all, has reversed. *Idiocracy* has arrived. Most forward progress is driven by a handful of true geniuses who also have obsessive personality traits (almost all men, young men). No such men, no true progress. And a seventh possibility is increasing laziness—maybe such men exist, but they fail to produce, either seduced by easy modes of living and entertainment, or discouraged by the difficulty of obtaining honors and distinction in a society through real achievement when such honors and distinction are said to be the result of unearned privilege, and are redirected to those with the right sex or race who achieve the equivalent of dropping seeds into the holes they poked into the ground.

No doubt our failure to sustain what, fifty years ago, seemed like our launch to ever-greater technological accomplishment is some

combination of these factors. Broadly speaking, all these are varia-tions on one theme: corruption and decadence. None of this is going to improve until our society is completely remade, starting with a total turnover of our ruling classes. This is not going to happen without a lot of trauma. But as I warned my children way back in 2019, someday, history will return, and I suspect 2020 has merely been the vanguard of that return. The key is to both permanently break the power of our ruling class, and to reinvigorate society by throwing out the destructive doctrines of the Enlightenment. A tall order.

And that brings up my second question—is scientific advance, of the modern variety, inherently corrosive of the good? It certainly is in our current society. In the unlikely event we had a surge of technological advancement, if Ray Kurzweil were proved right, or even ten percent right, the result would be disaster—Failed Perfectionism, and probably much worse. A society without virtue cannot benefit from technology.

But what if we had a new society? That is, is my proposed Foundationalist post-Enlightenment society, a dynamic and virtuous society that can and does execute Heroic Realism, a mere chimera, my own personal fever dream? Some think so; fairly often I am criticized for my belief that a reimagined modern world is both desirable and feasible—the High Middle Ages with rockets. At root, this is a claim that ever-advancing technology is inherently incompatible with virtue. This claim is modestly common on the Right, but not confined to the Right. Sometimes this is an argument based in religion, but by no means always—witness James C. Scott's claim in *Against the Grain*, basically that hunter-gatherer man is better off than modern man.

There is something to this; it is very often possible to construct a hindsight argument why Technology X is bad, because it destroyed Good Thing Y. But such arguments prove too much; they are similar to arguments that we would all be better off if we had never been born, since we would avoid suffering. No Buddhism for me, thanks. Seeking advancement is man's nature, and not advancing is going backward, which necessarily destroys any society, or at best leaves it in stasis: think China at any point before 1970. To be sure, true advancement through technology can only occur in any meaningful way among certain cultures and peoples—so far, at least, it has only ever happened in the West. Among those peoples and cultures, however, it's probably

inevitable, because a certain type of man will always seek improvements in man's estate (and such improvements often benefit the powerful, in war if nothing else, and are therefore sought by them). The proper response is not to stuff the genie back into the bottle; it is to channel technology through structures of society, high and low, the powerful and the powerless, that are organized around virtue. At least in some cultures, change must come, and while history has no arrow, in those cultures men will always push the needle. Better to recognize this, and use it for the good of all.

Yes, science produces ills and has to be constrained and channeled. But it is not inherently bad; on this earth, every society has difficulties and challenges, they just differ in type. To see the past seven hundred years of the West as decline, as some do, is wholly wrong. Rather, we took a wrong turn in the 1700s, and we got the poison of the Enlightenment diluting the achievements, spiritual and temporal, that were our birthright. It's not to late to get back on track, though. It'll just be, as I say, extremely painful. Best to get on with ripping off the Band-Aid.

And back to *Neuromancer*. Surprisingly, it has never been made into a movie. Unlike some books, it would not be impossible to do, and apparently there have been several attempts to organize a movie, all falling short of implementation. Of course, it would probably be a bad movie—witness *Ready Player One*, an outstanding book made into a mediocre movie, which more relevantly had almost nothing in common with the book other than the characters' names and the title. And as with the movie adaptation of C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair,* the making of which was cancelled by Lewis's stepson because the producers wanted to turn it into a feminist Girl Power movie, no doubt it would be all woke, and feature black lesbian hackers and no men at all. Probably best not to wish for a movie. Just read the book.