Notes on William Gibson, *The Peripheral*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

A Misunderstanding of Fiction

Gibson occupies an unusual place between literary fiction and the kinds of fantasy and sci-fi that use language as a minimal, transparent vehicle for fantasy. He has been read by any number of critics, including Fred Jameson, as a sign of postmodernism and the digital age; and he has been taken as a kind of cyberworld version of Nostradamus, full of predictions about our future. The implied author of "The Peripheral" is clearly engaged in both activities; the book is full of thought experiments about plausible or perfected technologies, and there are some extended meditations on the possible future courses of the world, climate, economics, and culture. I am not interested in fiction as litmus test or predictor of culture, and that's one reason I don't read much science fiction, fantasy, or genre fiction. But I think there's another, more interesting issue here: it occurs to me there's a sense in which projects like "The Peripheral" are made possible by a certain reading of literary fiction that could be described as a misunderstanding.

1. Writing

Gibson is a very good writer, by literary-fiction standards. Most every sentence is crafted. There are only a few passages that can be read at speed, just in order to get a sense of the story: most of the book needs to be read slowly because of what he's doing to language. His observations, dialogue, descriptions, and metaphors are often thoughtful and persuasive. He describes Tasmanian tigers as "carnivorous kangaroos, in wolf outfits with Cubist stripes" (p. 392). There's plenty of sharp-edged writing. At the same time, however, he seems to feel as if the "sense of the new" that remains a criterion of serious writing can often best be achieved by neologisms. Inventive language -- I am thinking of anyone from Flaubert to Eimear McBride -- defamiliarizes. Gibson's does too, but mainly by inventing things that don't exist. "The Peripheral" is full of imagined sorts of fashions and fabrics, tattoos that move, walls that are transformed by nanobots, teleportation of all sorts, out-of-body states, future weapons, future gardening with biogenic trees, several different kinds of remotely operated surgical devices, new kinds of encryption involving invented languages... it's a long list. Those are the things that make the language new, more than choices of trope or syntax. "Her hair white as the crown Macon had printed in Fabbit" is a good enough example (p. 222). It refers to a teleportation "crown" that had been 3-D printed by a company named Fabbit; the sentence is typical of the way Gibson avoids ordinary description, but leans on imagined things and neologisms.

2. Affect

If I try to imagine this book without the specifics of its plot -- which means subtracting all the hundreds of references to peripherals, sigils, imagined technologies, and time travel -- and ask myself what feelings, what desires or anxieties, drive the plot, then I come to two things in particular:

(a) A fear of the present. No character in this book wants to live in the present (with the telling exception of some romantic moments in moonlight, which are after all about wishing for an impossible ideal). The writing itself doesn't want to be in the present, and there's an ongoing effort to open a space between the writing and every experience we know. Here is an example. A
"sigil," in the book, is a kind of logo or icon that appears in a person's visual field and can be expanded into a "video feed" or even into an immersive virtual reality. Gibson often describes sigils the way a person might describe a logo. "An unfamiliar sigil appeared," he writes, "a sort of impacted spiral, tribal blackwork" (p. 236).

Here he's working hard, like an author of literary fiction, to defamiliarize. An "impacted spiral" is an interesting thing to try to picture, and a reader may have to look up "blackwork" to understand what he's conjuring. Imagining both the "impacted spiral" and the blackwork as an icon adds a layer of imaginative work.

The cumulative effect of sentences like this (which amount to maybe half the sentences in the book) is to make it seem that the author feels it's hard to make things new: that it's necessary to work continuously to produce even an incremental distance from the present. At the same time the work is fragile, because it's superficial (here he's only adjusting our notions of what an icon might look like). It's as if he feels he needs to pry open a space between the present and the place he wishes to be, as if it constantly needs to be renewed, because the fragile invented future is in danger of collapsing back onto the unbearable present.

(b) A desire to disappear. Characters in "The Peripheral" nearly always prefer dream states, projections, out-of-body experiences, time travel, medication, and dissociative experiences to living where they are. The book must have hundreds of examples of things that help people disappear: robots they can inhabit, toys they can wheel around by remote control, game worlds they can enter, Matrix-style teleportation comas they can enter, walls they can walk through, stand-ins they can program, cars and clothing that can be cloaked, cosplay zones populated with avatars and cyborgs, invisible tables in restaurants (eg, pp. 227-8).

The characters are ostensibly driven by the fairly complex plot, but affectively, in terms of their desires, they all want to vanish. As I read, I often thought of the author, as opposed to his narrative: to write a book like this, I thought, a person needs to want to disappear. The language of "The Peripheral" is a concerted attempt to "cloak" ordinary writing in a veneer of micro-metaphors, translucent to ordinary meaning but safe from it. The technology described in the book is an equally forceful attempt to picture ways that machines might help us dissolve some of our bodily mass and material into a foam of biogenic digital projections. The plot, too, can be understood this way, because it turns on time travel, and there are people in both the "present" (our near future) and "future" (seventy years farther on) who want to disappear, both within their own times, and within the "present"; and the plot is arranged in such a way that there are uncountable "presents," which diverge even as we read. What could be more comforting to someone who wants not to be present?

In a sense this is what's meant by "escapism" in popular fiction and film, except that here it is not only a matter of an invented world, transparently described, but of the act of writing, in a literary sense, put to the same purpose.

In the end, I don't mind the anxious ongoing invention of endless neologisms, technologies, and time-travel plots. They can, after all, be ways to "make it new." But it is a misunderstanding of Pound's injunction to think that language itself can't be made new unless it is injected with nanobots of unfamiliarity. That's one reason I won't be reading any more Gibson -- or, I think, any more genre fiction. The other tunnels under that first one: it's that the desire to escape, to vanish into time or the cyberworld is itself uninteresting because it is relentless and uninterrogated. It's the lack of reflection on the desire itself that puts this book outside the conversations of modernism and postmodernism.