

Designs for the Voice



Antoine Cazé
&
Brigitte Félix

In his later fiction, Joseph McElroy has been increasingly concerned with the meanings and connections of *voice*, exploring them in infinitely subtle ways; and more particularly, the manner in which voices may sound—in the two meanings of the verb—the extent and dimensions of human communities, defining a space of shared utterances as an envelope of words, phrases and sounds, so to speak, which is both coextensive to, and larger than, physical contact, since it is structured along a temporal axis allowing a plasticity of interconnections never quite made possible by mere spatial co-presence. Early on in *Women and Men*, this exploration is suggested by the narrative voice in the following terms:

All of this speaks. In many bodies or, as our leaders have said, on an individual basis. Speaks also, we understand, in this “we” that we have heard. What is it? some community? Ours. Operating less than capacity then suddenly also beyond itself. So that in the zone between we have this voice of relations—is that it?—of possible relations too.

[...]

Are these merely our angels? They angle into and out of our speech like some advanced listening advice we recognize because we remember from somewhere. And what is this community—this large We we ourselves voice? It will be a community for one thing and capable of accommodating even angels real enough to grow by human means¹.

As they inhabit a “zone between,” buzzing with interconnected messages, novels like *Women and Men* or *Actress in the House* redefine the limits of speech as what constitutes the articulation of “many bodies,” simultaneously made narrower (“less than capacity”) and larger (“beyond itself”) by their vocal interaction. By interweaving dialogues and more or less loudly voiced thoughts into a tight-knit pattern—a counterpoint/counterpane of shifts and mutual interruptions—, McElroy manages to give substance to a “voice of relations” that rises, almost specter-like, out of the fault lines of his stories; a “cry,” as of angels, sounded out of nowhere in the middle of the night, not unlike the aftershock of an earthquake:

Daley knew that he too must have felt [the earthquake] or its aftershock. And for a second, waking prophetic in the darkness of his house near the North River, not alone in those days, he had recalled a woman’s cry, a kid’s, a man’s, surprised and simultaneous and terrible, a dream probably, a foretelling like the phone going and you wake up to no phone: yet it does ring then, but with a nutty scent close by, sweaty warm skin. The ring was real all right².

Designing common, or communal, spaces for this voice to arise is the purpose of McElroy’s highly theatrical novel *Actress in the House*, where the layered direct or reported conversations that make up most of the textual space, and around which the plot is (de)structured, provide occasions for more or less failed encounters—the provisional gatherings of a cast of characters. The initial “slap” which—from the very first

¹ Joseph McElroy, *Women and Men* (Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1993), 11.

² Joseph McElroy, *Actress in the House* (Woodstock & New York: The Overlook Press, 2003), 44. Hereafter referenced in the text as AH.

sentence of the novel onwards—disturbs the linear, predetermined, unfolding of a theater play, immediately opens up the possibility for conversations that branch off to create a fractal soundscape.

In this contribution, we wish to analyze the various ways in which this soundscape is performed by McElroy's text; how the peculiar textual shapes of this highly conversational novel become an echo chamber, a linguistic theater house for the initial blow to resound in ever more complex interpolating ripples.

Timing the Voice: Voiceover

In one of the numerous moments of *Actress in the House* transcribing, or telling about, phone conversations (it is often perilous to separate the transcription from the telling about), the narrative voice mentions how difficult it is for Daley, the novel's protagonist, to match the actual taking place of the phone conversation with the meaning of it:

Assembled a stack of paperwork for a client: not a housing case but it came to his mind: an artist, a real artist, a difficult person in his honesty, who made his slim living custom-crating art and spoke so briefly on the phone that Daley, who had hardly had time to start the meter running and wouldn't have had it on anyway, spent some minutes in the analysis and expansion of these words to make full sense of them. (AH 176)

For Daley, the difficulty at stake here has more specifically to do with how to *time* speech—i.e., both to place it *back* in time and to assess its duration *through* time—and to account, perhaps at the *same* time, for his and our reaction to its overwhelming immediacy. The fleeting reminiscence (“it came to his mind”) of a no less brief talk over the phone appears to be caught between two slower, analytical moments of reflection when the character reassembles his thoughts: while “assembl[ing] paperwork” and “spen[ding] some minutes in [...] analysis and expansion,” the sense to be made out of someone's voice is deferred until another time than its actual sounding; or, even more tantalizingly, sound and sense can never be made to fit in the same time-space. In *Actress in the House*, voices tend to be “overheard” or “underheard”; they are out of sync with their own speech and this mismatch often gives an

opportunity to think about identification and identity. We should not forget here that early on in the novel, Daley's meeting with Becca—the eponymous actress who calls him to seek his counsel in “a housing case”—is the consequence of a confusion in phone calls: Daley expects Lotta, another of his clients, to call him, and he gets Becca on the line instead: “‘It's you,’ exclaimed this nameless voice, this person unknown to Daley—did she have the wrong number? Who did she think she was?’” (AH 20)³. Reversing the expected “Who did she think *I* was?”, the irritated question at the end reveals a more deeply existential one: in *Actress*, voices, because their address is constantly deflected into unforeseen directions, cease to be stable markers of identity, opening themselves instead to forms of playacting that threaten to replace true interaction. Thus Daley is never quite sure how to “place” Becca's voice: Is she Canadian? he speculates several times⁴. Is her voice for real or “Was it a voice of hers?” (AH 115), he wonders, in a phrase that suggests the possibility of both a disembodied “voiceover” and a differently embodied “other voice.”⁵

To return to our first example, it is interesting to note that the rift between sound and sense, which describes a snag in the passing of time—some kind of disproportion between the act of communication and its aftermath—, is obviously metafictional, too. Indeed, to spend “some minutes in the analysis and expansion of these words” appropriately describes the self-reflexive acts and attitudes provoked/stimulated in the reader of *Actress* by the book's game of ceaseless interruptions, most of them relayed by a literally *halting* use of syntax⁶.

³ See also: “when the voice proved to be not the one he'd expected, and it fluttered to the floor establishing itself there not flat but as if something lay hidden under it” (AH 168).

⁴ “Hey, she does all the voices, hers too, out of Canada, a touch Irish?—‘the bum's rush,’ you hear, is that Canadian or is it American?” (AH 175).

⁵ On the next page, Becca speaks one of her lines “in an *older* voice” (AH 116, emphasis added).

⁶ Commenting upon the fact that he writes “densely,” McElroy notes that “it's a matter of emotion and multiple thought, and sometimes multiple time, becoming congruent with syntax.” Marc Chénétier, Antoine Cazé, Flore Chevaillier, “‘Some Bridge of Meaning’: A Conversational Interview with Joseph McElroy,” *Sources* 11 (Fall 2001), 15. <http://www.paradigme.com/sources/sommaires.html#11>, last accessed 2/10/2010.

The metafictional dimension of such a phrase is strongly supported at this point by the fact that Daley, as we've just been told, "Assembled a stack of paperwork for [his] client"—an activity that oddly resembles book-writing (although a debased, or more literal than literary, version of it); and also, by the fact that the case he is working on is emphatically "not a housing case," thus creating a counter-echo to the book's title and the "house" motif running through the novel. Are we meant to understand that, unlike Daley, a novelist on the order of McElroy is someone who does not simply "assemble a stack of paperwork" but questions the very possibility, or tests the limits, of *assemblage*?⁷ In a similar vein, the character called Ruley Duymens mentions a "huge fabric roof" (AH 165) that seems to be stretching the possibilities of house construction: "the stretching of it from multiple points" (166) can also be an apt description of what AH tries to do⁸. A novelist, McElroy implies, would be someone who—by drawing our attention to the shifting time-frames of reading (pointed at by the double-take in the phrase "who had hardly had time to start the meter running and wouldn't have had it on anyway"), and to how these shifts are engineered by listening to voices unfolding in unpredictable directions—wishes to challenge any solidly built "house-of-fiction" concept.

But even then, is this metafictional reading not a little too pat? We willingly acknowledge having smiled when first reading those sentences, thinking "Ah! How clever!" and then taking pleasure in some minutes of "analysis and expansion." It is not that kind of coalescence of meaning into a node of self-reflexivity, however, that proves to be a stumbling block on the reader's path, even though it tends to slow down her reading by sending her on a metafictional loop. What is more truly difficult to assess in this novel are the moments of what we would

⁷ On assemblage as a mode of organizing information in *Actress*, see Mark Troy, "Shocks to the System: Joseph McElroy's *Actress in the House*," *English Studies Forum* 2.2 (Fall-Winter 2006). <http://www.bsu.edu/web/esf/2.2/Troy.htm>, page last accessed 10/2/2010.

⁸ The analogy between story (re)construction and actual building construction is emphasized in the echo McElroy creates between the words themselves: compare "Why did Daley have to broach to Ruley the—reconstruct the—somewhat aborted mugging then?" (AH 163) with "Well, a man Daley used to know had been in on the construction of this airport roof was what it was in Jeddah." (167)

like to call “gray text,” meaning this in the most positive sense (as in “gray matter”). What of this remainder, then? That is, in our example, what of the fleeting moment of the phone conversation itself, the voice at the *other* end of the line which only remains in the text as a barely overheard trace? Or rather, the voice which is displaced by the laborious, written reconstruction of its potential meaning, by its being glossed over by the Daley? In other words, the metafictional moment of “analysis and expansion” might well work here as a decoy, because it draws our attention to the well-trodden paths of literary analysis we are so routinely used to trekking along. It is relatively easy to focus one’s reading of *Actress* on such metafictional twists only, underlining all the long and short comments the narrative makes about “voice,” or “talk,” or “phones,” or “calls.” This tells us little, however, about the actual sounds, and soundings, of these voices, whereas *Actress* is deeply concerned with the possibility of sounding voices and voicing sounds in writing fiction.

What we are trying to say here, is that *Actress* deals with this question in two parallel ways⁹. One is the metaphorical/metafictional way, a good image of which would be the first immediate consequence of the opening “shock” in the theater house which swings the actress “right around *toward* the audience” (AH 7, our emphasis): the slap possibly damages the actress’s ear (“Concussion, commotion in the eye, retina displaced,” AH 9) while forcing her to turn her head toward the *audience*. In other words, *we* are asked to change our hearing habits, to listen to the text differently so as to construe, and attend to, its meaning by changing our perception of the various voices singing through it:

⁹ This could echo what Yves Abrioux has proposed in his seminal article “Vectoral Muscle in a Great Field of Process: Approaching the Dynamics of *Women and Men*,” when he notes that “What precisely concerns McElroy is the ‘gap’ or ‘separation’ between two levels of description: that of ‘de-personalizing’ scientific discourse and that which relates to the ‘body of emotions.’ On the one hand, there is experience—warm fingers; on the other, its explanation in terms of ‘bones, nerves, chemical compositions, exactly connected to spine and brain in relations that can be diagrammed and formulated with a clarity like that of topographical isobars on an ordnance survey map or a coordinated grid containing an analysis of stress.” *Sources* 11 (Fall 2001): 40. <http://www.paradigme.com/sources/sommaires.html#11>. The quote at the end is from McElroy’s essay “Neural Neighborhoods.”

“A sound from the house, a gasp, a groan, almost a word.” (AH 7). The second way of dealing with the question of voices corresponds to the second consequence of the initial slap: snatches of “conversation” immediately begin to sound through the text, “in the darkened house”—conversations whose interlocutors it is extremely perilous to identify:

The woman next to him whispered, “I knew it.” *What* did she know? What did Helen know? He smelled her scent leaning up against him now reminding him of whatever she can. He had forgotten she was there and why he was here. His last name whispered is all the years she’s known him. “Daley?” It’s quite some whisper. “What did you say, ‘He *can’t*’?” Daley hadn’t said a thing. (AH 7-8)

This slowly emerging array of spoken/speaking voices is characteristic of the complexity that keeps confusing the reader—the reading, rather—of McElroy’s novel. This is not meant to point out a flaw or failure of any sort in McElroy’s writing, of course. Rather, such confusion is necessary to the reading process. In *Actress*, there is a *ceaseless and generalized interference of voices*—including the narrative voice—that creates problematic juxtapositions. In particular, on many occasions a sentence is uttered by one character and the ‘answer’ to it (or ‘continuation’ of it) takes place in another (the same?) character’s thought. This is as great a challenge as one can imagine to the possibilities for reading to grasp the identities of the consciousnesses peopling the novel. As John Johnston notes, in McElroy’s fiction consciousness becomes “a site of displacements and substitutions, where an attempted narrative (ful)filling remains forever incomplete because it can never be fully occupied or accounted for by any individual subject”¹⁰.

We might therefore say that, by creating distortions in the timing of voices, McElroy suggests there is a somatic dimension of his text *as it is being read* which overrides the cognitive activity of understanding

¹⁰ John Johnston, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 99.

its actual meanings¹¹. Or to phrase it differently, what McElroy expects of a reader is that s/he should combine the work of body parts with a certain cognitive mobility¹². Indeed, the recurrent recording of perceptions, and of the way in which they affect the subject(ivity) that perceives them, gives an impression of prevailing physicality in *Actress*, which in turn is embodied by the emphasis on voice throughout. Thus for instance, the sentence “Was it a question he was being asked so the tone of voice curved back inside *him?*” (AH 370) illustrates the circulation from outside (the voice, the question asked about others) to inside—the insubstantial “tone of voice” materializing into a geometric figure (a “curve”) while the process of materialization seems to be highlighted by the use of italics, giving a typographical “image,” if not of intonation, at least of stress pattern.

Such porosity characterizes the entire set of relations between the protagonists, wrapped as they are in a continuum of voice. Thus, “feeling” is constantly seen as a border-crossing activity, as for instance in the parenthetical remark that “(he felt the girl’s hunger and humor next to him)” (AH 143-4), which is a doubly puzzling statement: for one thing, how can one mind actually *feel* another body’s sensation of hunger? And even more problematically, how could it actually *feel* “humor”? Of course, the sentence can be construed as built upon a classic figure of speech, a zeugma, and we can also note the balanced rhythm and rhyme of “hunger” and “humor.” Yet, the whole context of the novel is way too unstable to allow us to be satisfied with so

¹¹ Let us here recall what Richard Powers says about his own novels, which could very well apply to McElroy’s: “These books try to trouble the distinction between traditional mimetic fiction and conscious formal manipulation. They try to show that the world can’t easily be partitioned into ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling.’” Jean-Yves Pellegrin, “‘Only the Conversation Matters’: An Interview with Richard Powers,” *European Journal of American Studies* (2007-1). <http://ejas.revues.org/1145>, last accessed 10/2/2010.

¹² One will refer once again to Yves Abrioux’s statement about the notion of “vectoral muscle” proposed by McElroy in “Neural Neighborhoods”: it is, Abrioux comments, “not simply a handy metaphorical formulation alluding to the notion of cognitive embodiment,” but also “it suggests a way out of the abstractness of what Tom LeClair describes as formal systematics in which ‘substance’ is ‘subsumed to process’ [...]” (Abrioux 41). The reference to LeClair is to his *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989).

fixed a reading. In fact, “feeling”—like the recurrent mention of the richly polysemic word “impression”¹³—expresses the insubstantiality, but nonetheless embodied reality, of thought processes. It is linked with the notion of cognitive embodiment, as when Daley can feel Becca’s “breast under her sweatshirt against his knuckles” *and* feel “them coming, questions asked on the offensive” (AH 228), the two kinds of “feeling” being presented in two consecutive sentences.

That is an essential process in McElroy’s novel, as it was analyzed by Yves Abrioux in his article on *Women and Men*. There, Abrioux shows the usefulness of Deleuze’s connecting perception with affection in order to understand how Joseph McElroy’s fiction creates narrative from “unexpected associations of disparate pieces” and from the tension between percept, affect and reaction (Abrioux 48). Two further examples may be given in order to sustain this image of porosity as a working principle in the text, as it seems that the experience of the word and the world always has to be translated. The first is clearly linked to voice and speech: when Daley feels “imbued with his body” (AH 176), the physical sensation is compared to being “underwater,” a feeling that serves to slip into the micro-story of an American woman who has spent some time in Southeast Asia speaking French and then feeling as if she, too, were underwater upon her return to speaking English in New York¹⁴. The second

¹³ The word recurs in the novel (e.g. 122, 126, 151, 156) and is loaded with its two meanings of a) a general (and generally fleeting) feeling/reaction/opinion about a given situation; and b) a strong effect on people (as in “to make an impression”) and therefore a durable trace left in someone’s memory. To these must be added the theatrical sense of “imitation,” in particular of a voice, as in: “She [Della] did an impression of him Daley couldn’t have imagined her doing, the in-and-out, slightly rich Dutch (apparently) accent.” (AH 159).

¹⁴ The opening of chapter 3 in part 2 of *Actress* also focuses on speaking underwater and its effects, confirming the consubstantial link between “voice,” “feeling” and “impression” as a continual process relation to both the outer world and the inner mind, in a superb description that reworks the initial “concussion” opening the novel: “The song came and went underwater, gobbles of high, wired sound bubbled from his hum, his nose. Not him alone; someone largely absent he had the distinct impression? His sense of humor though. The feeling continued, channeled perhaps from the Lap God. [...] Long winds chilled the passage of sinus space through Leander’s brain, and

episode occurs when Becca's body—more specifically, her sex—is abstracted into a “fortunate space” (a periphrasis that almost reads like a metaphysical conceit) tracking Daley “like her body's vector free as a mind to know just where you were” (AH 229). From space to vector to mind, the text of the sentence traces a reading path but the sentence yields unstable, shifting meanings due to ambiguous appositions. Meaning moves along the line of the sentence—it leaks, so to speak—as the sentence offers the physical proximity of “body” and “mind.” This is one instance of the numerous sentences that are interesting problems because the narrative enters what McElroy calls “the doing of the sentence.”¹⁵ To use a recurrent adjective in the novel, we can say the sentences are characteristically “slippery” in many ways and directions.

Such slipperiness has to do with one of the central motifs and techniques of the entire novel: the *voiceover*, first appearing in the opening scene as a theatrical device: “Loudspeaker voice came out of nowhere from time to time soft and strangely informative, hers, just like a voice on the phone and everything stops for twenty, thirty seconds, and it's *her*” (AH 9). However tempting it might be to see in this device an equivalent of the narrative, or even authorial, voice pervading the novel, we would like to see it perhaps more fruitfully as the result of the interference between an embodied presence and a disincarnated absence. In the image of this sentence introducing it, the voiceover is simultaneously in and out of time, a gendered body and an asexual sound, a personal possession (“hers,” singled out in the middle of the sentence) and an indeterminate event displaced onto the level of a comparison (“like *a* voice on *the* phone”). More than anything else, it acts as the colloidal solution in which the characters' individual voices are bathed; it is heard in between actual utterances that keep mixing various modes of interlocution—a technique quite similar to what William Gaddis achieves in *JR* or *Carpenter's Gothic*. The descriptive

from outside and inside him came the concussion of a woman entering the pool he had the distinct impression, the perfect insertion acoustically swallowed up so neat it was a splash reversed, a thin stone spun into the pale green waters.” (AH 209)

¹⁵ Marc Chénétier, Antoine Cazé, Flore Chevaillier, “Some Bridge of Meaning: A Conversational Interview with Joseph McElroy,” *Sources* 11 (Fall 2001), 22. <http://www.paradigme.com/sources/sommaires.html#11>.

section of page 126 offers a convincing example of such conjunctive disjunctions, as it includes and combines:

1. free indirect discourse (“Daley wasn’t representing her”);
2. sentences in which the narrating agency is erased thanks to the passive—or maybe “passing”—voice (“cufflinks and demeanor being yet again described unnecessarily,” which briefly “sounds” the metatextual *voiceover*);
3. traditional third-person narration/description that provides some anchoring to the flow of thoughts and words (“as Daley and Becca approached a backstreet intersection, headlights down the block bobbing this way,” where *this* banks on the “here and now” of deixis);
4. dialogue, direct and indirect speech.

The overall impression is of a narrative flux, as in Gaddis’s texts. McElroy’s writing, however, seems to rely much more on strategies of disjunction that constantly redirect the narrative and stop the flow by making us feel the substance and substantiality of what we are “swimming in”¹⁶—a “stop-and-go” sensation which the metapoetic sentence appearing precisely on this same page underlines: “It was somewhat decentralized, how it all networked” (AH 126).

The novel is therefore all juxtaposed and jumbled voices, as is obvious from the beginning, for instance in the phone conversation opening chapter 2 mentioned earlier: expecting Lotta, Daley gets Becca. The ensuing conversation is suspended (“Wait” is used three times within a few lines [AH 20-1]—another metafictional pointer suggesting timing difficulties?) and the suspension allows the interference of various digressive thoughts and reminiscences, like the loops of a freely

¹⁶ This metaphor is borrowed from McElroy himself, in the interview quoted above, where, speaking of the “strange territory” of his fiction, he corrects “territory” into “substance” because, he says, “I think more of water here” and of the reader swimming. As illustrated in this issue, McElroy’s current major writing project is a nonfiction book on the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of water.

associative mind, like the hand that draws “concentric doodles” (AH 21) around the name of Helen. Daley is brought back twice to the waiting interlocutrix before the conversation really starts—in indirect and free indirect speech, which maintains a distance between the reader and the situation discussed by the characters. Such juxtaposition of voices is visible in the recurrent use of brackets, as in a later episode where parenthetical comments “stage” the play of voices and give the illusion of presence and distance, in an attempt to create a complex kind of perspective on the two-dimensional page (see AH 226).

In fact, it seems that all the juxtapositions imply and include separation and distance. Here are several types of disjunctions to illustrate the point:

1. “She looked around the house. She felt good” (AH 110) is juxtaposing with ellipsis. Going from an external viewpoint (first sentence) to an internal one (second sentence), the text brings perception and affect as close to each other as possible. Only the link is missing between the two. Are we meant to suppose/supply the connection?
2. The same kind of hesitation prevails in the sequence: “He counted on Helen’s staying put; she didn’t care much for intermission. She had a skirt on” (AH 18). This time, the subjective/objective short-circuit is mediated by a remark on “intermission” which acts both as a textual (material) and metatextual interruption. It is the in-between-ness of the situation the narrative tries to take upon itself, the fact that in this universe of interconnections, “intermission” is paradoxically the kind of gap that eventually serves to (re)connect. As in the first example, the paratactic style McElroy adopts makes these intermissions palpable in the tempo, and on occasion the delay, marking his sentences. As noted above, a keyword in this respect is the verb “wait,” whose importance Daley subconsciously perceives while walking and talking with Becca in smoothly halting manner:

Where were they? Walking. Where something was waiting to happen; or nothing; and it was up to him. The girl was smart all

right: his mother's *No* meant *Time*, this kid who just said things had said. Why in hell did it mean Time? The *No* of someone Daley sometimes now hardly remembered. What is it that waits to happen and where does it wait? (AH 129)

3. Finally, disjunction can be figured typographically, as in the insertion of the bracket in “this curious 19(in a jumpsuit)⁸¹ addition to your *life*” (AH 167). The visual interference of the parenthetical detail stretches the date—and implicitly the time, in an effort to mimetically jump back to a distant past; it images the breaking up of continuity in a distortion that violates scriptural conventions and tests the resilience of both reader and text. Such an extreme physical tension of the text can be seen as a metaphor for the tension between expectation and the impossibility to predict what will happen *next*: the closest is sometimes the farthest you could think of. The recognition of patterns can only be very local and limited. The situations are always extremely “fragile,” to borrow a leitmotiv from Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*. The “assemblages,” or configurations, of meaning are often only provisional, which is by no means a “failure” but the index of a dynamic process at work. This state the text is plunged in may on occasion be suggested in metatextual fashion: “The one-woman show with all the voices drifted into extreme clarity half of it gone leaving a foursome passing in the dark room, forming and crisscrossing and still” (AH 380).

Distorting the Voice: Voiceunder

As we have already been suggesting through the analysis of various local examples, such voice effects in *Actress* are made possible by the extreme care with which McElroy attends to the connections between the macro- and micro-levels of his textual construction. In particular, the novel transcribes as closely as possible the rhythmical quirks and turns of oral utterances captured “live,” so to speak. Even though a lot of passages in *Actress* are written in a quite straightforward, daily idiom—compared to the highly technical vocabularies to be found in other novels by McElroy—, this relative simplicity is challenged by numerous syntactic distortions, many of which are the consequence

of an attempt to transcribe speech rhythms, and more generally the oral dimensions of language. Typical of this kind of stylistic device are sentences such as, “She was spending her adult life based in Manhattan sort of” (AH 147). A deliberate trace of the American idiom in one of its most common embodiments, the use of “sort of” creates a slightly surprising twist at the end of the sentence that retrospectively changes the reader’s “feeling” (not her understanding) of the preceding words. It transforms a relatively neutral third-person narrative statement into a relatively *embodied* utterance or voice, though whose voice it might be remains unclear, a kind of effect without a cause—without a clause. A similar result is produced by the frequent use of “but” at the end of a sentence, emblematic of McElroy’s attempt to make syntax congruent with multiplicity and process: the alternative route indicated by such a dangling, disjunctive conjunction at the end of a sentence, is left open but willfully untraveled, an option one fleetingly considers before turning away:

Becca didn’t know what they were doing here, she was ready to go. She was still thinking about Daley’s brother. Why was she doing that? He had told her the Osaka story *but*. Weren’t he and his wife on vacation? she asked at checkout. Oh yes; *but* caught by this emergency much, much nearer than Wolf’s family in Seattle. (AH 227, emphases added)

The antiphonal play of the two “buts” in this passage—allowing a subterranean connection between Becca’s unresolved doubts and Daley’s emphatic reassurance (see the repetition of “much,” creating a phonic echo to “but”)—underlines the role of narration as an almost literal suspension, not only of disbelief but most crucially, and performatively, of syntax and rhythm: just like Becca as she is being told a story, the sentences here are “ready to go” but. For McElroy, therefore, to attend to the speech rhythms of his characters with such minute care is yet another way of suggesting that the possibility to establish a community of speech depends on the multiplicity of “angles” provided at all points by shifting perspectives, of which a problematic (and problematically placed) connector like “but” is a trace. An uncanny example of this speech community in process is given by an interruption in the

dialogue between Daley and Becca that allows a deeper, more intimate, continuity to be suggested:

“I’m going to take that barge trip, you get on at Cincinnati and get off at New Orleans, that’s the way.” They looked across at New Jersey lights.

“You don’t know a river,” Daley began—but she laughed at him or he felt her intelligence.

“—until you’ve been on it,” she said.

“In it,” Daley said, feeling in new sprinkles of rain the distinct chance that she had seen someone she knew standing at the bar.

“No...,” she said doubting whatever he was going to tell her, not the facts of it. (AH 141)

The feeling of strangeness is generated here by the delay, or space, between the first half of the proverbial-like sentence and its concluding tag; it is reinforced by the disjunction within this interruption provided by the rather odd alternative of “but she laughed at him or he felt her intelligence,” placing on the same level as it does two different points of reference, “he” or “she,” engaged in two different acts that are presented almost as mutually exclusive—or as equally possible, even as there seems to be an unbridged gap of meaning in the co-presence of the two ways of reading the situation. The bifurcation created by “but” suggests an unresolved relationship between the two halves of the interrupted sentence, and therefore between the two characters, who seem to communicate as much through their minds as through their words. You cannot *know* until you have *felt*, an embodied cognition which McElroy’s syntactic strategies and dialogue situations enact on the page by virtue of their constructive interruptions. In some cases, these are signaled almost invisibly, by the *lack* of an expected punctuation mark that would have helped clarify the syntax, as in the following, highly ambiguous sentence which deals once again with the conflicted relationship between “knowing,” “feeling,” and “understanding”:

The big chestnut horse and its rider had an understanding going that was like a conversation when Becca stepped over onto the left-hand sidewalk so the cop in his white helmet could pass,

Daley stopped where he was in the middle of the street. Yet he could have been wrong and her reasonable action—which brought him actually closer to her—could have been an instinct as perceptive and supple and no less knowing than it not occurring to Daley to move out of the way; or as generous as the horse and its capacity to understand the encounter feeling it as fully and skeptically as its will was with the rider whose touch it knew in advance. (AH 133)

The lack of commas blurring the syntactic articulations of such a long sentence—for instance, one might be added between “than it” and “not occurring,” or after “encounter”—suggests the “bringing closer” together of perception, knowledge and action, providing a yet-to-be-charted ground for the “encounter” between understanding and feeling, in an extremely efficient manner. In describing the multifactorial events preventing a collision between horse and man from happening, McElroy indicates that other, intra-linguistic collisions of sorts do take place within the textual web he designs. “Like a conversation” (which is what Daley and Becca have been having throughout this walking scene), McElroy’s sentences proceed along ceaselessly bifurcating roads, halting and flowing at the same time, full of corrections and self-corrections, rerouted by interpellation patterns and bracketed segments creating the sensation of what might be called a “voiceunder”—not unlike Nathalie Sarraute’s concept of *sous-conversation*, or *tropism*, which she introduced as early as 1932 and defined in the preface to her famous 1956 essay, *L'Ère du soupçon* (*The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*):

mouvements indéfinissables qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience ; ils sont à l’origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu’il est impossible de définir. Ils me paraissent et me paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence.¹⁷

¹⁷ “Indefinable movements that glide by very swiftly on the edge of our consciousness; they are at the root of our every gesture and word, of the feelings we evince, or think we experience, and which are impossible to define. To me, they seemed—and still seem—to be the secret wellspring of our lives.” (Our translation)

This is generated, too, by the discursive instability and the uncertainties in the narrative system of *Actress*. The narrative discourse is heavily modalized, in particular by the frequent interrogations about what is happening, or has happened. Not surprisingly, the first two questions of the novel are quite programmatic in this respect: “But what?” and “*What* did she know?” (AH 7), trigger off a series of similarly inflected questions, turning the narrative into a general enquiry—a “groping” that McElroy sees as a possible definition of the way in which he writes¹⁸. *Actress* is sustained, fueled by questions, questioning as a form of action that sets the narrative into motion, from one sentence to the next. Moreover, indecision prevails, as can be seen in the recurrent use of alternatives: “Or the room is familiar, or will do, and is nothing” (AH 187), Daley speculates, which is as arresting and thought-provoking as the collection of heterogeneous possibilities listed a few pages before:

Perhaps it was the fugitive and passing young woman
Becca who added curious concentration and fullness to the
understanding or the picture, or what Leander had said about
the agency, or that it came like sounds to Daley from a pool
humming like the city or like space or emptiness of the past
together with its occasional creak of a diving board. (AH 179)

Such a generalized instability is reinforced by the disturbing modes of interpellation pervading the novel, like an extension of the theatrical situation that triggers off the whole story to such an extent that the reader feels addressed to by the text without being able to tell where the voice addressing her comes from. The designs for the voice blur what the voice designates. In some cases, the addressee unexpectedly turns out to be the reader, even as it had seemed to be the protagonist: in a passage that first reads as an interior monologue on Daley’s part (“This is how Daley figures it,” AH 195), the pronouns change gears in mid paragraph: “Whole show took place in one day then it was over, *you might think, but not Daley*” (*Ibid.*, emphases added). At other times, the ambiguity of address is part of the play on a generalized

¹⁸ “Because I think these gropings have half-conceptions, are not only part of the route toward something better and fuller, but they have a value in themselves.” Interview, 25.

uncertainty in identity, including that of the narrative voice, which sounds sourceless. The pervasive second-person pronoun tends to draw the reader in, alongside the narrative voice. The instability of the narration, however, makes the reader's position problematic: "you" are "called" in, but it is hard to determine where the voice that calls comes from, hence "you" do not know what to do with this calling, with this strange intimacy and proximity the calling voice creates in a text where disjunction precisely interferes to introduce distance. Instances of such a decentered nexus of interpellation are to be felt in the odd use of "We" as a single-word concluding sentence (Part 2, Chapter 1, AH 188), or in the recurrent succession and combination of "we" and "you" (AH 172, 319-20).



A sounding board for the concept of voice in fiction, *Actress in the House* worries the possibility for any voice to express any stable identity. By creating a web of shared, and often unassignable, voices, McElroy's narrative offers a sweeping reflection upon our conceptions of presence, including the presence of the reader as an "actor/actress" in the house of fiction. One of the most interesting effects of the novel's voice scheme is that the voice is rarely located *in* the text, but rather the result of a ceaseless interaction between a double system of "voiceover" and "voiceunder." In the early description of the voiceover device sounding in the "darkened house" of the theater, this interaction is hinted at, as Daley tries to assess the hybrid nature of the voice, both overbearing and intimate, masculine and feminine, inside and outside, natural and mechanical, present and absent:

Never *really* hear these voice-over words in the darkened house that came from everywhere and nowhere, passing, stopping everything, they made the people freeze onstage, a voice (an authority) close like a beloved on the phone; amplified but from the outset unmistakably the woman. Coming from the house. Borderline embarrassing, Daley thought, a voice-over. A voice that knew something. That's why you're here, Daley thought.

Dominant, unbearably dear, proof against anything that voice,
even the blow. The odd story took shape. (AH 13)

It appears crucial that this voice should come “from the house”: its *economy* (house rule) points to its communal nature, which radically displaces a single origin and identification. McElroy has created a voice that is welcoming in its deviations from set patterns, favoring illicit resonance over rational sequence, accepting the uncertain stutter of “this large We we ourselves voice” (*Women and Men* 11). Ultimately, renouncing any clear authorial/authoritative stance, the designs for the voice in *Actress in the House* reflect McElroy’s generously relational world: “for while he lives, haply he is lived. By relations processing him into perspective, maybe he’s theirs. [...] Lived by others? Sentimental inkling, no more. Though it goes on at length somewhere, it’s just hearing yourself in others.”¹⁹

(Cazé: Université Paris Diderot–LARCA, EA4214; Félix: Université du Maine–3L.AM, EA4335)

¹⁹ Joseph McElroy, *Women and Men*, op. cit., 92.