

“Continually Re-enchancing the World:”¹

Virtually Joseph McElroy



Mark Troy

In this brief discussion I will be looking at one area of Joseph McElroy’s writing: the embodied actualization of creative potential. This is an aspect of McElroy’s texts that I have been wrestling with for some time; that throughout his novels, sometimes in a low-key manner, but sometimes unsettlingly, McElroy employs various strategies to embody the becoming² quality of prose. What I’m trying to say may get clearer as I exemplify these moves in three of his novels. Further, I’ll claim with these examples that Harry Garuba’s useful concept of “animist materialism”³ allows (for reasons I’ll indicate) a more comprehensive take on McElroy’s articulation of aesthetic territorialization.

It was only gradually that I realized the extent and force of McElroy’s extraordinary ontological curiosity; the ways in which the

¹ See Harry Garuba.

² For Deleuze & Guattari’s rich term, see e.g., “...Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming Imperceptible...” (*TP* 232-309) .

³ Garuba is drawing on an African ontology, in which the divine is not recognized in a transcendent, immaterial sense; it is understood to be physically and materially manifested in the phenomenal world.

syntax of his form and content indicates a deployment of fiction as philosophical research, envisioning—as I’ll try to instantiate—the process of associative immanence. Fishing for a way to explain what I mean by “fiction as philosophical research,” I think for example, of post-colonial works such as Derek Walcott’s “The Prodigal;” Ivan Vladislavic’s *The Exploded View*; or David Dabydeen’s “Turner;” texts which feel compelled to newly examine and re-define subjectivity, society, environment. McElroy makes similar intellectual and imaginative demands on his reader, refusing to be confined (as I will discuss) by realist genre conventions. This constant demand that the subjective, social, environmental context be reexamined, from unfamiliar perspectives, makes it difficult to get your mind around his maximalist novels; they are crammed with possibly structurally or systemically joined happenings, thoughts, details; they are usually realistic, in the sense of being firmly grounded in the everyday world, rendered finely. At the same time, they are (eventually) incorporated in what Edouard Glissant might call a “poetics of relation” (169–79), interacting with other events or phenomena, in a continually unresolved syntax.

How to phrase this? What I am suggesting is that when you read a McElroy text, to a certain extent, his intensely portrayed fictive fields⁴ resemble the living realism of the whale Moby Dick: you remember how when that novel begins, the sub sub librarian seeks for a viable concept of “whale” in the library, but the archival definitions and portraits are rejected as necessarily partial, so that the reader must with Ahab hunt for the “great wet whale” (*Women & Men* 379) implicately enfolded into the watery words—which is the sort of hunt the reader undertakes in a McElroy text. Aided by gradually accruing details, or quantum theory, or wind currents, or complexity theory—or the poems of Emily Dickinson—the reader finds him- or herself trying to chart an intricate syntactic journey of abrupt shifts and sudden openings that make it difficult if not impossible to grasp or encompass everything going on in the novel: in fact makes it necessary to colloiddally suspend events and characters without being able to fix them; a conscious

⁴ Readers of McElroy are in Wilson’s debt for his discussion of what he describes as McElroy’s “field” novels: “The tension and the validity of McElroy’s fiction derive from the discovery of an image of a fluid field which would enclose us in its totality...”

suspension that leaves the reading vulnerable, vulnerable like an island quaked into a state of liquidity, of movement—as I will illustrate in a little bit.

Now, I've been talking about McElroy's texts embodying artistic creation in a fishy way. The concept is hard for me to explain abstractly, so I'm going to exemplify this overflowing energy, with brief references to a few quite different McElroy novels. I'll start with *Plus*, a sci-phi (science-philosophy) novel which explores potential development of a human self, towards possible post-humanity. Then, I'll move to *Women and Men*, that very large novel of human relationships, in which these relationships are sometimes manifest as immanent angels. After this fairly explicit development from pure potential or intensity towards the actual, I'll turn to the subtle trembling or seeping geologic movement of Manhattan Island in *Actress in the House*, in which the metropolitan island is sensed as a meta-archipelago, refining the reader's awareness of movement, flight, phenomenal ambiguity in Manhattan's geological strata.

To reiterate from a slightly different perspective: looking at these novels together, for traces or glimpses of an immanent syntax, I think it becomes clearer that the fictive field—the implicate consciousness of the fiction—is enfolded into the realistic characters, events, contexts. Hence, my rather free references to “realism” are in some ways a meditation on how a certain aquacious animism inhabits McElroy's fictions—and indeed, after looking at the novels, I'll refer briefly to Harry Garuba's description of animist materialism and how African—post colonial—assertions can help us see what's going on in McElroy's meta-Caribbean⁵ Manhattan.

The novel I'll first turn to is the most obviously cosmopolitan—in the sense of belonging to the cosmos—of McElroy's novels; the comparatively slim *Plus* from 1976. The title refers to a satellite, Imp Plus—Imp being a NASA acronym, Interplanetary Monitoring Platform—plus. The plus is a human mind—the almost bodiless brain—at the heart of the monitoring platform; as the novel unfolds,

⁵ The term is Benitez-Rojo's, emphasizing—as I think McElroy does in the case of Manhattan—an island machine “whose flux, whose noise, whose presence covers the map of world history's contingencies, through the great changes in economic discourse to the vast collisions of races and cultures...” (5)

we learn that the brain has been removed from a terminally ill scientist, hooked up in the satellite and launched into space, to see if the brain can act as a monitor, circling in space—assigned the task of registering the effect of unfiltered sunlight, the brain engaged to an accompanying green growing metabolism to generate energy (*Plus* 29). The plot appears at an early stage to be a classical sci-fi scenario, laced with realistic technical discourse: the brain is the central consciousness of a cyborg (Priouette), coupled into plants so it is nutrified with dextrose, oxygen, chlorophyll, as it monitors and sends information back to earth. Crucially, the mind is not a blank slate: beyond the segment of the brain registering and transmitting, there is a shadowy recessive area, which retains traces of memories—memories of people and events, memories and feelings. These fleetingly remembered impressions reinforce or interact with very minimal sensual ideas of for example the feel of the sun outside the earth’s atmosphere. Of course the attraction of the unfiltered sun is extraordinary, since the brain is hooked up to vegetation and begins participating in chlorophyll metabolism—and has memories of summer. As these strands of science, memory, human desire intertwine, it is increasingly clear that the brain is becoming more than a constructed cyborg. For example, it has vestigial nerve traces, at the site of optical nerve stems, as it realizes a need or desire to see, as the brain unexpectedly begins growing new visionary organs—but they are not ours: it realizes “the simultaneity of multi-sight... compound eyes” (*Plus* 159).

The brain has been physically deterritorialized, existing in weightless unfiltered sunlight, singularly becoming. It can’t describe this to itself with words, it is growing new ways of sensing itself in the universe: “more than brain, more than body, other than either.” (*Plus* 211) It becomes increasingly difficult for its mind—and the reader’s mind—to distinguish between the brain and the vegetation feeding it with oxygen and sugar, permeated by the extreme energy of the sun. Trying to describe a subject that is human, yet more, I turn away from conventional genre norms towards Garuba’s description of animist materialism or realism: the embodied action of spirit in material, indeed technological reality. The immanence of the animism is brilliantly done; in a strangely Thoreauvian examination of becoming, Imp Plus is nourished by the sun, without exploitation of another life form (*Plus*

188, 202) . The mind becomes other: Imp Plus, traveling light—it’s as close as I’ve seen anyone get to a visualization of becoming, of the impossible subjectification of Deleuze & Guattari’s virtual.⁶

Women and Men (1987) is a very different novel, different in size and segmentation. It’s a considerable work, around 1200 pages of detail, panning back before historical time, forward into space; a wide load across the American continents, continually returning to some of the women and men living in a condominium in New York City in the 1970s. This is a staggeringly rich text full of rooms, movement, stories, myths, meteorology and a wealth of interesting characters, but right now I am not looking at the book for its comprehensively global vision, but because some chapters are inhabited by angels; not divine messengers, but immanent, material angels, encountered at odd places in the text; relating, listening to characters, even being interrogated; but how can this be?

The immanent angels can be seen I think as an example of McElroy’s extraordinary conceptual curiosity: fiction as philosophical mapping. Through the angels, the question seems to be asked—and responded to: What is a character *before* it is a character?⁷ Engaging a smooth space, the fictive field of the artist’s imagination, what is a narrative voice, when it has not yet become a consciousness, or subject—still only an opaque narrative center, comprising relational, interactive voices—but not yet adequate to be a character? That’s (some of) the angels. They embody the relations in the area between characters: the growing threads in the space between, the movement, in the imagination or consciousness operating between the different discourses, they are relational thoughts, impressions—and apparently, the stronger the relational nexus, the more solidified they become, the more chance there is that a segment of them (angels of change)

⁶ For a brief discussion of the actual and the virtual, which seems in fact congruent with Garuba’s discussion of animist realism—the actual surrounded by clouds of virtualities somewhat as Garuba sees the spiritual embodied in the material—see *Dialogues II*, then return to McElroy.

⁷ Or, what is a character *after* it has been a character might be asked, if you follow Brian McHale’s suggestion that Imp Plus is precursor to a *Women & Men* angel (203-4). His illuminating idea is (in other words) that Imp Plus is finally becoming, whereas certain of the (becoming) angels, become.

may become characters (396)—and some characters can in fact faintly sense the presence of angels, within them and around them. (e.g., 102)

Most difficult to grasp I think is that the angels are not messengers of the transcendent—not the angels of the bible, or of Rilke, or Michel Serres; rather, they help populate an immanent plane, existing as relationship, “relations” quite as Deleuze explains relationships: “pure immediate consciousness with neither object nor self” (“Immanence” 26). Rather than traditional messengers of transcendence, then, the immanent angels embody plural & polyphonic relations,⁸ a sort of transit station,⁹ relational aspects of the fictive field. As an angel observes, “. . .we are the relations between them.” (*Women and Men* 10), or “. . .potential relations” (*Women and Men* 19). In sum, they are becoming, transverse relationships—though they may rigidify into characters. And, since some characters have a rather uneasy awareness of angels interacting with them (*Women and Men* 102) there is a strange sort of animist territorialization at work. As an angel expresses this: “as we think them so they now think out of us” (*Women and Men* 26).

Shifting from *Plus* to *Women and Men* meant adjusting perspective from an individual subject in an immanent universe to a field populated by a goodly number of characters—or, points of view—interacting over broad spaces of time and place. I am going to turn now to a different field, evidenced in few sentences of McElroy’s most recently published novel, *Actress in the House*, (2003) in which I think animist aspects of his experimental realism are considerable, if lower-keyed than *Plus* or *Women and Men*. Substantiating this claim I am going to be looking at another subject: the deep geological strata of Manhattan island.

Actress in the House is like *Women and Men* centered on the city, firmly planted in contemporary Manhattan; however, there’s no

⁸ That’s Guattari drawing on Bakhtin’s description of subjectivity (*Chaosmos*, 1). I’ll suggest too that McElroy’s angels echo Guattari’s view of the ecology of subjectivity as “a complex aggregate of heterogeneous elements” (O’Sullivan 90).

⁹ This metaphor is used by Gary Genosko (106), citing *Three Ecologies* on subjectivity (36) The relational angels become especially exciting when we recollect that in *Chaosmos*, Guattari asserts that the aim of ecosophy is to foster an ecology of the virtual (91, discussed in e.g. Stivale 89-90)

need for the reader's—or a character's—imagination to cope with the becoming chloroplastic self of Imp Plus, or vague relationality of *Women & Men's* immanent angels.¹⁰ This does not mean that the text's sharp focus on the effects of abusive if not traumatic memories—public and personal—yields easy ethical answers; the experimental realism of the text demands an intellectual and imaginative investment. Certainly, (as indicated by the title) the performative reality of the theater—the house—seems conventional enough, but there is a certain spillover of the fictive when the actress Becca Lang imaginatively interacts with the protagonist, investigative attorney Bill Daley (in *his* house). Further: the specificity of buildings, the solidity of concrete and stone is shaken from the very first sentence. The action starts with a forceful staged blow, a sudden, disorienting event; Becca (striving to deal with memories of incestuous abuse) has been slapped by her on-stage brother (in the *play's* story), jolted by a sudden smack: “a shock, that's all it was, in the darkened house.” The violent blow seems spontaneous enough to have been a real one; so the line between fictive actor and fictive reality seems to have been violated (*Actress* 15). I'm arguing that the power of this initial jolt so shocks the narrative and the story in the narrative that its effect radiates out, like a disturbance in a still pool; hence a certain relational fluidity is maintained, as the shock echoes through the ecology of the narrative field, in a material way. For example, early on, Daley (who we later learn has, since participating in the Viet Nam conflict, coped with traumatic memories hovering in his consciousness), is on the phone, anticipating in thought that it's a client, who he remembers was earlier disturbed by an earthquake—an earthquake through Manhattan—Manhattan had been trembling—Manhattan is at depth sensed as being composed of sliding tectonic plates, escaping trickles of water, slurry and ground-fill that could in future be reduced by a quake to mud.¹¹

¹⁰ Though the protagonist Bill Daley is quite uncomfortable when he occasionally may float into another individual's consciousness (176).

¹¹ Interestingly, in McHale's discussion of *Women & Men* as a history of modern literature (188-205), he asserts that it is necessary to read the book “geologically” to perceive the striations of realism, modernism, postmodernism (188). I am suggesting that McElroy employs strategies enabling lines of angelic flight around and through the generic structure.

To reiterate: the narrative is initially disturbed by a slap, a shocking slap, the effect of which is reinforced by the recollected earthquake, so the “largely unnoticed” (*Actress* 44) “trembler” and “aftershock” transversely extend the jolt suffered by the actress in the house, shivering through the narrative itself. The free indirect consciousness senses and tries to cope with the sudden disorientation; “a momentary stirring underfoot, another river down there deep in the stony earth below the street, deep below the Hudson and parallel (like a theory) expanding, overflowing banks that simultaneously stretched and widened, rolling, a dragon having a minor nightmare at six in the morning underfoot, a temblor you would swear way below you when you had been expecting some weather overhead” (*Actress* 165)

These are just a few nitched sentences, but what’s happening here is I think pretty astonishing. Interactively relating the context to character consciousness the narrative is characterizing Manhattan as spatially unstable, a shifting living being: it’s being cumulatively described like Benitez Rojo’s repeating island: “a discontinuous conjunction...to sociocultural fluidity...ethnological and linguistic clamor...generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane... unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the lands and seas of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs” (3). We’re not talking fantasy; it’s a New York novel, the way say Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is a London novel; the paradox is that precisely because *Actress in the House* is authentically anchored in geological layers, the quaking movement is incessantly trembling the actual island of Manhattan, which disorients, defamiliarizes the point of view, the free indirect narrative: the present and the recollected memories.

This destabilizing movement, I am suggesting, is the sort of stutter that Guattari calls for in creative writing: “*the outside* of language, yet not outside it” (CC 112). The effect of this syntactic instability in the exemplary novels I’ve looked at is to generate the reader’s sometimes uneasy awareness that subjectivity and indeed the inorganic ecologies of these becoming novels are not easily restricted to traditional genre prescriptions; which is what Garuba is indicating when he suggests that animist realism—what he calls the embodiment of the metaphorical in the phenomenal—“spiritualizes the object world in

an effort to continually re-enchant it.”¹² You see, Garuba’s notion is that the animist unconscious emphasizes the open and transformative notion of animism that coexists with technological modernity, in a very sophisticated ecology comprising the human and non-human, the organic and the inorganic. And, that is where I think McElroy is going in all his recent texts: not just in the trembling movement of the geology, but as I’ve tried to show, in the very plot, in the re-memories conveyed by the narrative consciousness—indeed, through all aspects of McElroy’s fiction, from the formation of character to perception of the most solid granite as a flowing meta-Caribbean, the realistic fictive fields are imbued with what may usefully be explained in Garuba’s terms as animist materialism, a potential for immanently becoming, virtually Joseph McElroy.

¹² This is a vital aspect of the often unexpected transverse links in a McElroy novel between scientific theory and the solidity of—for example—rock, or water. This is to say that McElroy seems to go in the same enchanting direction as Garuba when he explains that he strives to give his ideas or theories a virtual validity “By tying them as closely, even at times fanatically, as I can to phenomena...” (qtd. in LeClair 248).

Works Cited

- Benitez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island*. Trans. Jema E. Maraniss. London: Duke UP, 1992. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "He Stuttered." *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 107-114. Print.
- . "Immanence: a Life." *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*. Trans. Anne Bogyman. New York: Zone Press, 2001. 25-33. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London: Athlete Press, 1987. Print.
- Deleuze, Giles, and Claire Parnet. "The Actual and the Virtual." Trans. Eliot Ross Albert. *Dialogues II*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. 148-152. Print.
- Garuba, Harry. "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society." *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): n.pag. Web. 22 Sept. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu.bibproxy.kau.se:2048/journals/public_culture/v015/15.2garuba.html>
- Genosko, Gary. "Subjectivity and Art in Guattari's The Three Ecologies." *Deleuze/ Guattari and Ecology*. Ed. Bernd Herzogenrath. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. Print.
- Guattari, Felix. *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*. Trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. Print.
- . *The Three Ecologies*. Trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. New York: Athlone Press, 2000. Print.
- LeClair, Tom. *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989. Print.
- McElroy, Joseph. *Actress in the House*. New York: Overlook Press, 2003. Print.
- . *Plus*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print.
- . *Women and Men*. 1987. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1993. Print.
- McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- O'Sullivan, Simon. *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. Print.
- Prioetti, Salvatore. "Joseph McElroy's Cyborg Plus." *EBR* 18 Aug. 2004. Web. 22 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/criticalecologies/seeing>>
- Stivale, Charles L. *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari*. New York: Guilford Press, 1998. Print.

- Troy, Mark. "Shocks to the System: Joseph McElroy's Actress in the House." *English Studies Forum* 2.2 (2006): n. pag. Web. 22 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.bsu.edu/web/esf/2.2/Troy.htm>>
- . "Virtually Joseph McElroy." British Association for American Studies 55th Annual Conference, School of American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich. 9 Apr. 2010. Panel Presentation.
- . "'Women and Men:' A Becoming Novel." *Lines and Traces: Papers Presented to Lennart Björk on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*. Ed. Gunilla Florby and Karin Aijmer. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2006. 126-33. Print. Gothenburg Studies in English 93.
- Wilson, William S. "Field in the Novels of Joseph McElroy." *EBR* 3 (1995): n. pag. Web. 22 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr4/wilson.htm>>