

# Joseph McElroy



*Andrew Walser*

A few years ago, around the time *Actress in the House* was published, I edited a festschrift for *Electronic Book Review* devoted to the works of Joseph McElroy. The project struck me as a success and strikes me that way still: I reread with particular pleasure Tim Keane's essay on *Women and Men*, and the way he saw it (as I did not quite put it at the time) not just as a modern epic, but also as a collection of stories about "small-scale intimacies—a work [as much] James [as] Joyce" (Walser). Keane's piece seems particularly prescient with the publication by Small Anchor Press of *Preparations for Search*, a slim volume that reminds us that, however much McElroy may *amplify* his concerns, he does not *inflate* them for the sake of grandiosity. The man is not a maximalist, but a realist. If he composes books the size of *Lookout Cartridge* and *Women and Men*, he does so because they are the *least* he can do to do justice to the world around him.

Now *Golden Handcuffs* has—to its vast credit—undertaken another festschrift for McElroy. And the enterprise has started me to thinking, once again, about literary survival. Why? Because the festschrift is not a party we throw for the already well-feted. We throw it to share a local enthusiasm, and to make a few converts, and that is why, behind

the festivities, there is often a certain anxiety. Perhaps, we think, masterpieces always triumph in the long run. But perhaps that is just a comforting lie, one we tell to help us forget how easy it is—even without the aid of Qin Shi-Huang and Theophilus of Alexandria and other large-scale vandals—for greatness to vanish.

I take McElroy's greatness as a given. And yet—to be honest—he does not make survival easy on himself. Yes, he displays in all of his work a command of the “highly specialized discourses” (Siemion 134) that make up the unprecedentedly powerful system of contemporary science. Many of his contemporaries, by comparison, are dealing only in simplified sketches and textbook condensations. But this command is not necessarily an advantageous trait, when it comes to literary selection. For most readers, the problem is not mastery, but how in the absence of that mastery to make *enough* sense of the world—and McElroy may simply be too brilliant and conscientious to construct a model of the whole that is encompassable by minds less formidable than his own.

Then there is the question of the prose. Like many other late 20th-century realists, McElroy likes to overload his sentences—which makes them a match, after all, for our information-saturated world. But the true mark of his prose is not density but *suspension*. His sentences delay their payoff. They interpose countless “midcourse corrections”—as he titled an important essay—between what we learn at the beginning and what we must learn by the end. Many of them push at the limits of the mind's processing capabilities; they exercise and sometime exhaust the short-term memory, which we are told can hold six or seven items at a time. The effect of this technique—this tendency, McElroy once said, of his sentences to “end and not end” (10)—is that even the savviest readers can take half a month to finish the 200-page *Plus*.

None of this is cause for panic. The World Republic of Letters—or whatever one chooses to call it—works slowly, and, as James Merrill once put it, “Late here could mean, moreover, In Good Time / Elsewhere” (82). In the end, we are aiming our praise at the future—when McElroy is finally teaching *everyone* (through however many layers of diffraction) to make sense of the world, and when our unimaginable descendents, masters of science and suspension, will say to themselves that, even in their author's benighted time, a few primitives made sure his extraordinary books stayed alive.

### Works Cited

- McElroy, Joseph. "Midcourse Corrections." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.1 (Spring 1990): 9-55.
- Merrill, James. *The Changing Light at Sandover*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.
- Siemion, Piotr. "Chasing the Cartridge: On Translating McElroy." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.1 (Spring 1990): 133-9.
- Walser, Andrew. "A Joseph McElroy Festschrift." *Electronic Book Review*. 26 September 2004. <<http://www.electronicbookreview.com>>.