

Dr. McElroy, Homeopath: What One Goes to Him For

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IN CONSIDERING WHAT to write here, and trying to decide what most distinguishes Joseph McElroy's fiction from that of his contemporaries, it struck me that he would like to cure us. It struck me that while many, if not most, serious contemporary writers write out of a feeling that there is something wrong out there, out in the world—and that it really is worse than it ever has been—most convey no confidence in the possibility of change. They may hope, but they don't do so in their texts—I don't mean by making positive statements, rather through what can best be described as an atmosphere of open space in the prose, a kind of outward-moving energy, that is expressed both by McElroy's style and his questing narrators and characters. In both the short, spare, private-life-centered works by the so-called minimalists and the whole-world-replicating mega-books by their counterparts—the two poles of contemporary fiction's spectrum—the writers limit themselves, if one can put it that way, to eschatological eloquence. However one feels about this, it is in the anti-claustrophobic, anti-paranoiac nature of his prose that McElroy most differs from his contemporaries, particularly those giant-book writers (notably Pynchon and Gaddis) with whom, especially after the publication of *Women and Men*, he most invites comparison. Though many other writers certainly imply that a change in our ways of thinking and perceiving is imperative if we are to endure as a species, their fiction does not convey the conviction that such a change is possible or that, if achieved, it would necessarily effect survival. In other words: without this, nothing; but with this. . . ? No guarantees. McElroy's fiction, on the other hand, from the level of the sentence structure on up, not only seems imbued with a belief in the possibility of survival but aspires to be part of the solution.

As for what McElroy might want to cure—it's nothing new; it's that familiar condition of feeling too lost in the knowledge of too much being wrong to be able to do anything about it. It's a condition for which, if you don't know you have it, McElroy's fiction can most likely not serve as specific. Instead the prescription would be for those books that can come to seem, after a period of immersion in McElroy's work, symptom-relievers, recognizable by their straightforward prose and uncluttered story lines. Whatever the pleasures of such books, their prose is clearly not meant to be,

as McElroy's is, a made-in-the-laboratory neurotransmitter intended to look into receptor sites heretofore unused in our minds and rearrange the way our synapses fire. Homeopathy is that medical practice based on the belief that diseases can be treated by drugs that themselves produce symptoms like those of the disease being treated, and McElroy's homeopathy consists in dosing us with language that, once we learn to read it, can teach us to read the world. As you wend your way through some of McElroy's sentences, you find, not so much yourself, as yourself *in the process*—yourself not lost through diffusion but enlarged through connection.

Though elaborating the medical metaphor risks the implication that reading McElroy's fiction is like taking an ill-tasting substance—unpleasant but good for you—I don't mean that; but I do mean that it can do something real and serious to you. Perhaps it's a mistake to sell McElroy's fiction over the counter. Categorizing it as a prescription drug would probably enhance its marketability. If one weren't allowed to read his novels until one's condition had achieved a certain gravity—or one's awareness of it had—no doubt this would augment their popularity. Yet I not only think, as do most of McElroy's admirers, that he deserves more readers than he has; I think he potentially *has* more readers than know about the big medicine his fiction is.

One sign of his fiction's curative powers lies in their all being mysteries. Although all novels *are*, in the sense that one reads to find something out, most novels are not mysteries in the way that those in the genre are. Genre mysteries are problem-solving novels by definition. Though McElroy does not write genre novels (people who know his work will be entertained by the very existence of such a statement), it's instructive to begin reading his books as if they were; observing how one's expectations are traduced tells a lot about how McElroy's fiction works.

The "regular" mystery begins with an unexplained event: a suspicious death, most usually—the archetypal occasion which reveals the traditional appeal of the genre: what is most unexplained and inexplicable in life—death—is in the mystery novel made sense of, shorn of its terror and strangeness. Yet there's an aftereffect to reading the usual mystery (to some extent to reading any traditional "realistic" fiction) that the addict will recognize: you come down off the drug. So *that's* what happened, you say to yourself. *That's* all. But finishing McElroy's books never causes this feeling of being sent back to one's own life with a disappointing thud. McElroy's books might better be blurred with, instead of encomiums from the literati, notices that these are a new kind of mystery-thriller: addiction to which is harmless because, once you've read the books, you find that what you're addicted to instead of the fiction is your own, now *realer* world.

McElroy's novels, in one way or another, all begin with mysterious events. The plot of *Lookout Cartridge* revolves around the search for a missing canister of film. *Ancient History*, his third novel, actually begins with an unexplained death, in this case a suicide, and the novel develops

around the narrator's attempt to understand his friend's death. Even in *A Smuggler's Bible*, McElroy's first novel, one has not read very far before one encounters people engaged in perplexing pursuits: David, the protagonist, is busy with a pile of unidentified manuscripts; there is a zoologist doing something strange with jars in the ship's bathroom; a man on deck speaks cryptically to David about smuggling. . . . In all these books, one starts asking the usual questions—who, what, when, where, to whom, why—yet soon realizes that one can't pursue these questions in the usual way. There is no background, and none is filled in when one expects it; it's as if one has come in on the second chapter. Further puzzling is the fact that significant, gap-filling information can't be counted on to announce itself in McElroy's work. The salient facts do not glow, as it were. The curtain will never be flung aside to reveal a smoking gun. There may *be* a smoking gun, but it will be introduced in a subordinate clause in a sentence whose valency is directed elsewhere. An image blooms inconspicuously in a participial phrase—then, like the diva's tapeworm in *Women and Men*, battens on its host until it has become an entity in its own right, only in its turn to fall prey to other images, voices, beings, themselves eager to achieve the authenticity of being substantive. The initial mysteries are not so much elaborated upon as stared at, stared out of countenance, really, and even seemingly uneventful things are stared into strangeness through repetition, by being looked at from so many points of view and in so many contexts. Key words and phrases, particular events, continually reappear, so that one asks, What does this being echoed here mean? Yet you never *realize* what it means as much as make room for the image's growing dimensions in your mind. What is so odd about this is that in most fiction one expects to be able to construe a hierarchy of events, and here there isn't one—but this is a part of McElroy's meaning: everything is important.

Elevating everything to the same level of dramatic significance—or, rather, obliterating the judgment value of a hierarchy—has another effect as well. The reader finds him/herself in the same position as McElroy's first-person narrators and protagonists: not able to wonder yet about the *meaning* of their existence because they're too busy figuring out where *their* existence is to be found. *The Letter Left to Me*, McElroy's latest and shortest novel (which in many ways serves as the perfect introduction to McElroy's body of work), shows more clearly than ever that this struggle to recover authentic experience is a quest upon which, among other things, all of his protagonists are embarked. From the disembodied brain orbiting the earth in *Plus*, trying to remember itself back into a full emotional life, to Grace Kimball offering her anything-goes self-exploration workshops and James Mayn running all over the place investigating the culture and his family background in *Women and Men*, all of the characters are seeking to grasp hold of their genuine feelings about things.

In *The Letter*, the unnamed narrator is trying to sift through everyone

else's reactions to a letter left him by his now-dead father to find his *own* reactions. His private experience of the letter was aborted, first by the letter's distribution to relatives and then, even more nauseatingly, to his college freshman classmates. He never felt able or given an adequate chance to say no, so in addition to feeling the loss of his own experience, he feels he lost it through his own fault. A similar sense of culpability adheres at times to other McElroy protagonists, and speaks to the malaise of many of us: for how much of what is wrong are we responsible? The question can keep us hamstrung, yet maybe there's a solution we haven't thought of.

In the final paragraph of *The Letter Left to Me*, in a passage clearly meant to be reminiscent of—though by contrast, more affirmative than—Beckett's Molloy's "I can't go on. I'll go on," the narrator wonders: "Will I know more about my state? I am wild, in my haste, and I will live a new life. The letter is everywhere and I can't answer for it. I'll answer the letter. I can't. But I will." By now the letter no longer is, for either narrator or reader, simply advice from a dead father. It is the weight of the past; it is what has been left to the boy, to us, by everyone who came before us. It is "everywhere" and we "can't answer for it," most obviously because the people who wrote it are dead. Yet we have to answer not only to the past but to the mysterious, uncertain present; if we don't engage in a dialogue with them, we will never live a "new life." The suggestion, however, seems to be—both specifically in things people say in the books and in the subtler messages conveyed by the prose's fractured syntax—that this new life cannot be achieved by retracting the self, drawing the world into the self and holding it there, as the boy in *The Letter* first tries to do, but by, instead, unfolding the self into the world.

In *Women and Men*, James Mayn, recounting a conversation he has had with "the Chilean" during an Apollo space launch, speaks of "thoughts we may or may not call our own that go nowhere until we immerse ourselves in the larger colloid." The reference is to a term defined earlier, "the colloidal unconscious":

... it is between a solution and a suspension—fine particles in a liquid, you know. Homogenized milk but not a dust storm. Particles too small to see under a microscope. But for the unconscious I do not know what it is. But I carry it onward, you know.

The Colloidal Unconscious? I asked.

Sounds like news, he said.

Something else is what it sounds like, something else I have never heard out loud before, or a crackbrained American business. (82)

And a little later:

I said. The unconscious? You sure it's out there?

Yes: it will be there even after it is gone, said the Chilean (though he may not have meant the unconscious). It is taking us there. It is like a nation, an institution. It is not

people, though it is like greed. I say *us*. I am of the Americas.

It's people giving their destiny away so it's all clear and set, I said (not myself). (84-85)

It's ambiguous here whether the colloid is an ocean of many people's life-energies or an all-swallowing self-perpetuating totalitarianism; the point is that, in McElroy's fiction, any one person's life is shown to be larger, more inextricably tied to the lives of others, and by extension to the life of the planet, than we've been accustomed to thinking.

The mysteries, the homeopathic uncertainties discussed so far, have primarily been those of action and event. In the earlier books (the two already mentioned above and *Hind's Kidnap*), the language itself, sentence by sentence, does not bear much of the burden of the ambiguity. But from *Lookout Cartridge* through *Plus* and then most spectacularly in *Women and Men*, the language, in particular the syntax, becomes increasingly unstable, the voices unattributable. And it is here that one really sees the homeopath at work: if one allows oneself to get lost in the text, then that may cure a larger lostness in the world.

There is nothing confusing, precisely, about the opening chapter of *Women and Men*—a woman recalls giving birth; but after only the first page nothing really seems in focus. As in earlier books, not only does what's being told feel like narrative succeeding introductory material not given us, the point of view is already that unidentifiable, amorphous one that multiplies and transmutes itself throughout the novel: "Pain all in her back worked free of her at the end, dropping away into a void below, and it could almost not be recalled" (3). Recalled by whom? Why does the line not read, ". . . *she* could almost not recall it"? This kind of subtle vagueness is endemic to McElroy's style. What is pain that it should exist apart from her, as if possessed of its own volition? If it is *loose* like this in the narrative, anyone else might feel it—and in fact this is one of the larger conditions of the novel: a kind of collectivizing of experience, as characters study how to merge with others without losing themselves. Thus the immediate experience of a single sentence can take us right into questions with which the text as a whole deals.

The independence of the pain from this particular woman is also emphasized by its "dropping away into a void below." It is not an attribute of her; it is something that beset her and then left. Quite aside from its being a strikingly precise way to describe the experience of pain, this phrase exemplifies the way McElroy spatializes emotions.

He found it all around. It opened and was close. He felt it was himself, but felt it was more.

It nipped open from outside in and from inside out. Imp Plus found it all around. He was Imp Plus, and this was not the start.

This haunting passage, the opening of *Plus*, is an example of how

McElroy tries to make perceptions tactile—you can *feel* your mind operating. The pronoun “it” is repeated six times, but does not refer to anything. This sends one into one’s own mind to come up with something for “it” to refer to—as well as to understand the paradox of how “it” could be “himself” but also “more.” Both experiences of the mind’s inadequacy for responding to the text, however, begin to prepare the mind for the expansion it will undergo during the course of the novel. Some language may literally have the power to make our experience new, by actually, physically, altering the neural pathways on which our thinking runs; McElroy is working with language on this level. The prose settles new territory in your mind as you read—which is what may make reading him an uncomfortable experience at first; we expect to be able to fill in a writer’s fictional universe with pieces we already mentally possess. Yet McElroy is not trying to disorient his reader because he believes any attempt to order a text falsifies the world; his impulse is creative, not destructive. He takes on the glut of information in the world as a challenge, not as something to be withstood.

In a sentence farther down on the first page of *Women and Men* we are treated to (or *with*) one of the syntactical dislocations or stretchings that make up McElroy’s signature—“. . . the talk that went almost and sharply along with the pain her husband Shay—she was thinking of him as Shay—also in surgical green, could not draw off into the ten-buck pocket watch he’d timed her with (where was it? in a pocket? mislaid? she didn’t care where it was)”—the adverbs out of their usual place, the prepositional objects that become direct objects, clauses sneaking into being only swiftly to be replaced by other clauses. Faulkner mixed with James and fermented by some down-to-earthness, making McElroy’s style one of the few immediately identifiable ones among contemporary American writers. These dislocations are yet another way of unfurrowing our thinking. His fractured prose takes the world—our perceptions of the world—apart with the final ambition of doing what all the king’s horses and men reputedly couldn’t—putting it back together again. Yet McElroy knows what the aforementioned seemed not to—that it can’t be put back together in the same shape it was in before it fell apart.

As said earlier, McElroy does write mystery stories, while redefining and enlarging whatever the mystery may have seemed to be as he goes. It’s as if he were to have said, All right, I’ll tell you this story—I *will* tell it to you—but not only must you allow me to do it in my own way, at my own pace, making whatever digressions I like, you must also promise to revise your own initial curiosity to conform to whatever I choose to tell you. It’s a transaction replicated in dialogue between his characters—another object lesson for the reader.

In *Lookout Cartridge*, for instance, a girl asks the first-person narrator, “How long you been over?” (He’s American; she means how long has he been in England.) Instead of replying, Oh, eighteen years, which is

approximately how long it's been, he says he has "a daughter almost her age who was born a year before we moved to England" (8). To discover the answer to her question, the girl (who like the reader may wonder why the man can't give a simple answer to a simple question) must, after first registering that he's a father, remind herself how old *she* herself is and then realize that he's been in England most of her life.

Did he answer her question? Yes and no. He certainly took advantage of it. His reply might serve as Lesson One in how to elevate a conversation with a stranger out of the realm of small talk into genuine personal connection. He also, by giving her more information than she asked for, forced her not only to alter her expectations about the conversation but also to reexamine her initial question. Was "How long had he been over?" what she really wanted to know? Might she in fact not have wanted to know precisely what he told her, but not have been admitting it to herself?

In dialogue McElroy's characters frequently respond to what each other has not said, at first perhaps puzzling the reader. Yet this is also the beginning of our hearing the questions we had not realized *we'd* asked: what *really* goes on between people, men and women, women and women, men and men, individuals and pluralities—and how does the world reflect and affect that? If we didn't realize, at first, that we were asking these questions, it's because we're actually asking them all the time but have resigned ourselves never to expect them to be addressed directly, and certainly not on the practically cellular level of which McElroy is trying to make us conscious.

Somewhere in the high-tech accomplishment of McElroy's fictions I suspect there lurks a country g.p. who would still make house calls, if only we lived in a world where that made sense. The humanitarian impulse in McElroy's prose does battle with the real world we live in—its technology, its political lies, its serpentine economic realities—and survives. The impulse is kept under control—McElroy takes care not to hazard too unfashionably optimistic a prognosis (such as might be inferred from a linear plot, for example), to promise too much (which the controlled eagerness of his octopus-like prose, the distance he requires it to travel before permitting it the least bit of lyricism, communicates), or to let us believe he is infallible (by providing an unqualified omniscience under whose aegis we might sit back and relax). Nonetheless a palpable authority gets into the tone; one might define it as the writer's unapologetic confidence in the necessity of asking us to follow his treatment: he believes it's the only one there is. The reader who follows it will find that his books stay with you, like primary experience, when so many others have dissolved. They will take you to places in your own mind waiting to be thought.