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An acoustic metaphor : the fragmentation of voice in the Work of Joseph McElroy

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May 2003

'An Acoustic Metaphor': The Fragmentation of Voice in the Work of Joseph McElroy

by

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English

Lehigh University

April 25th 2003

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

April 16, 2003

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Abstract

Joseph McElroy's work is often said to be cold and technical because of his unusual use of scientific systems in literature. My goal in this paper is to show how this view is limiting. I base my analysis of oral aspects of written words on the novels *Lookout Cartridge, Plus* and *The Letter Left to Me*. When describing McElroy's voice, I try to show how it provides a harmony between human lives and science. How do we achieve a state of balance between the globalizing system of science and the subjective aspects of human lives? The multiplicity of McElroy's voice adds a dialoguing effect to the narration enabling a movement that makes the reader approach the texts differently. The dialogization theory that Bakhtin underlines is pushed even further in McElroy's works when they structurally disrupt the dialogues and the narrative rules. This technique makes us pay more attention to the oral aspects of the novels. We also have to take into account the way the novels dialogue with the reader. McElroy's novels are close to the reader's world because of the oral effects they insert into the fixity of the written world. The dialogization and the oral effects create a presence. The presence of our reading makes it alive and sensual. We therefore see Barthes's "pleasure of the text" in connection to the unusual orality McElroy adds to his novels. The use of scientific terminology adds to the oralization of the texts and lets us approach words in a sensual way.

'An Acoustic Metaphor': The Fragmentation of Voice in the Work of Joseph McElroy

—Isn't voice an acoustic metaphor?
Joseph McElroy. "The Voice to Become What I Am", 156.

In the context of the contemporary American writing, McElroy is often compared to William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon or Robert Coover, because of their common concerns for epistemological questions. He uses in his fiction a large variety of paradigms (theory of chaos, cybernetics, biology, data processing, geology, botany, genetics, ecology, relativity, as well as others) to question the ways in which we think of science and technology and how epistemological questions affect our lives. McElroy's novels are intricate in their composition, and the participation of the reader is always necessary. When one reads any of the seven novels published by McElroy, one is asked to reflect on the way a human experience seen as a collaborative network can be conveyed within the constraints of the linear process of writing.

Joseph McElroy has produced seven novels that can be considered demonstrations of the complexities involved in reconstructing any past event that deals with the ways in which our relation to the world is linked to the experience of language. Through those inquiries, he reflects on the linguistic nature of narrative; his research into literary creation involves experimentation in narration, syntax and on the structure of his fiction. In *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), the narration is presented as a recorded cartridge given to the reader. Consequently, the question of the reliability

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of the narrator and the effect of multiplying the focus are at stake. In *Plus* (1977), the brain of a man is put in orbit to communicate with the Earth, and our reading is then merged with the process of a dialogue between two voices. *The Letter Left to Me* (1998) presents a boy receiving a letter from his dead father the written words of which enable a mental discussion between the two characters. These different examples show McElroy playing with voice as theme and structure. I shall concentrate on these three novels to underline the way McElroy alters the syntax and the organization of his texts to make his reader feel that a voice is speaking in his novels.

Most critics approaching McElroy pay much attention to his use of technology and science. It is indeed a characteristic of McElroy's fiction that changes our way of reading. McElroy's novels have often been compared to complex systems. Steffen Hantke and John Kuehl consider McElroy's novels as demonstrations on conspiracy and paranoia because of the political debate at stake in fiction and the systematic organization of the novels. Tom Leclair uses system theory and its perspective on information to approach McElroy's use of form and language and literary construction. The experimental structure as well as narrative and stylistic methods of the books are interpreted as excesses that change the relationship of the reader to fiction. The mega novel *Women and Men* is seen as an open system that challenges the framework of the traditional novel both thematically (when adding technical data to the plot) and structurally (when defamiliarizing the reader thanks to excessive uses of fragmentation, paradigms or gaps).

Toni Tanner and Frederick Karl focus on the treatment of space and field that makes us approach the texts as maps since "in addition to moving towards some form of 'ultimate topography'—a and the vivid evocation of differing terrains— . . . it reaches out to explore the states of moated consciousness in which the sense of place (and other people) begin to fade altogether" (Tanner 234). Frederick Karl notes that the constructions of the novels are architectural and compares the figure of the labyrinth to novels like *Hind's Kidnap* and *Lookout Cartridge*.

In her book, Christine Brook-Rose analyzes the specificities of McElroy's experimental language and his transformation of the use of signifiers and signifieds in *Plus*. She compares McElroy's novel to poetry because "the sentences are nonsensical . . . because they do not obey semantic restriction" (273). She pays attention to the special use of colors in the narration to show that "McElroy . . . is interested in the sentence less for its abstract structure than for its contractions, its ambiguities, its qualities of density and clarity, of obstacle and absence of obstacle, or in more conventional term, its aesthetic quality" (288).

Some other critics emphasize the importance of technology in McElroy's fiction. David Porush explains how McElroy applied cybernetic theory to the construction of his fiction in *Plus* and how it makes the reader experience the de-automatization process Imp Plus goes through in the novel.

> The extremity of cybernetic fiction's response can only be explained by the extremity of the technology creating its context: cybernetic fiction is a means for the author to present himself or his literature as a soft machine, a cybernaut-like hybrid device, combining human vulnerability and imagination with machine like determinism (22).

Joseph Tabbi also links the machine and the text because "the absorption of appearances into the machine is consistent with the present argument that an imminent meaning is to be found in technology's own construction" (28). He claims that contemporary technologies are used as a medium to deal with the world and consciousness. He characterizes McElroy's fiction as "field-based" and "abstract" when analyzing "the differential and relational models in the growth of Imp Plus" (154). On the other hand, he links the fiction of McElroy to "Midcourse Corrections"—a personal essay fragmented by interviews led by the author. When connecting the essay to McElroy's novels, Tabbi interestingly links the novels and their use of technology and science to the personal data explored in *Midcourse Corrections*. This approach leads him to explain how "language . . . is not separate from the world but is a technological extension, articulation, and/or revision of it" (163). The reference to *Midcourse Corrections* enables Tabbi to demonstrate that fiction and personal data branch into one another. His account gives a human aspect to McElroy's work which has been minimized by other critics. However, the human and emotional (as opposed to the systematic and technological) angle of McElroy's does not have to be tied to his biography. The novels do not need to be connected to the author's life or thoughts on his fiction to be analyzed as concerned by human beings. It does not mean that technology and abstraction are absent in McElroys' book. But this aspect should not be disconnected from the human quality of the author's work.

For McElroy, "the science reaches out of the lab into everyday work and survival and community" (Plus *Light*). That is why it is important to pay attention to

his use of science and technology. However, science has often been seen as a tool that make McElroy's novel cold and less interested in human beings than in the complexity of globalizing systems. The impersonal tone we usually associate with science is transposed on McElroy's fiction wrongly. McElroy uses technical terminology in order to find means of expression that are accurate to the complexity of the world, not as a way to alienate humanity. McElroy sees "science not as arcana but as thought, attention, personal imagination, and a vocabulary of forms: part of that embracing fiction about people and families, cities, nature, the rush and color and manners and plasm of factual and mythy possibility that can go into a novel" (Plus *Light*). Science is not an abstraction that never connects to our lives. It is part of people's intimate and personal experience of the world.

My reading of McElroy's novels is based on a humanized approach to the paradigms McElroy uses in his fiction. What other critics have underlined in McElroy's work is important but to get a full understanding of McElroy' s fiction, we need to take into focus science and life in the same perspective without trying to separate them or emphasize one more than another. I want to explore the relationship between orality and literacy that creates particular dynamics in McElroy's work. The neglected human concern of McElroy's novels is stressed in his use of voice. As most McElroy readers note, the author tries to reach a different communication with the world thanks to new literary arrangements and new uses of language. When characterizing McElroy's voice, I address the dialoguing aspect of the novels that brings "two areas into conjunction in a way which is unusual." As the author explains, "there is a certain conjunction in my work of ordinary women and men,

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children, family, domesticity—that whole area—and this other, we may say *larger*, matter, which involves technology and science and disaster, urban planning and that whole thing" ("Some Bridge of Meaning" 12). I will thus take up the vocal effects and the dialogization of the novels and map out the melodious effect of such orality and connect this harmony to the bodily functions of the text showing how its structure— linked to orality—creates a state where fragmentation and multiplicity achieve a stage where reading and writing can be in communion through the body of the text.

When dealing with McElroy's fiction, we have to explore the way different voices are used rather than focus on a singular voice at stake in the novels. In *Plus*, the complex hierarchy of voices and the tension between them exemplify the multiplication of voices. The book is structured by the tension between the different voices appearing in the text. Imp Plus communicates with Cap Com. Cap Com's voice is the voice of a computer or a machine of some kind placed on earth. It is also the voice of pilots in airplanes, which is related to Imp Plus's situation. This technological speech is abbreviated and it leaves out articles. It uses only imperatives and concentrates on the practical effect of language: "CAP COM TO IMP PLUS: CHECK FREQUENCY CHECK FREQUENCY" (14). Cap Com's sentences are not structured by a correct syntax. It uses a telegraphic speech and keeps repeating the same phrases, and the computerization of this voice is also present when we realize that the same sentences come again and again in the book. Phrases such as "DO YOU READ ME" (19)—which obviously refers to the reader's act of reading too—are repeated by Cap Com while the novel progresses. The clearly distinguished voices of the novel can be analyzed as a dialogization effect.

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Bakhtin sees dialoging voices in novels, components of the novel penetrating one another to reach a harmony. They are dependent and autonomous at the same time and that's what makes the novel interesting. Voices can be dialogical as far as social voices are concerned, for instance. To that extent, voice cannot be considered as a single representation of the author as we traditionally consider it but it enables different components to respond to one another in the text. Each voice is distinctive but related to another voice and present in the other voice's system. Cap Com is in tension with Imp Plus: its voice keeps stable. On the contrary, Imp Plus's voice evolves through the novel. At the beginning, Imp Plus communicates with technical terms such as the ones used by Cap Com: "IMP PLUS TO GROUND: ARE SPROUTS FROM OPTIC STALKS?" (11) Toward the end, we read:

> IMP PLUS TO GROUND, IMP PLUS TO GROUND WHAT HAPPENS TO BRAIN'S THREE DIMENSIONAL MAP OF RETINA WHEN NO RETINA IS LEFT TO PLUG INTO? WHAT HAPPENS TO FLAMING GLAND BELOW DISCOLORED OPTIC CROSSING WHEN BRAIN DISPERSES? HAVE SEEN AND BEEN BUT DO NOT KNOW (208).

In the narrative, we realize that Imp Plus is not focusing on the physical or bio-chemical state of his brain anymore. He eventually remembers what it is to be a man when relearning both the meaning of words and the images from the past he can associate with them. The style of the sentences is still telegraphic and technical but Imp Plus's communication is longer and more elaborated; we notice the frame of normal complete sentences mastering Imp Plus's thoughts. We assert this interpretation because of the parallel voice present in the narrative.

In *Plus*, the text is physically altered by two voices: the print explicitly creates a tension between several sources of enunciation. The communication between Imp Plus and Cap Com is always given in capital letters and is characterized by the technical and telegraphic specificities we underlined. The other voice is the narrative of the novel in lower case letters. The narrative is centered on Imp Plus's point of view and gives to the reader the thoughts that cannot be translated into Imp Plus's words because he is learning the world again and he thus needs to learn its language too. The empowerment of Imp Plus is linked to the tension between the two voices of the narrative. The capital letters are much more present at the beginning of the novel than they are later on. The narration of Imp Plus's story becomes the center of the narrative and the narration only makes sense through this tension. Imp Plus's capital letter dialogues become altered by the empowerment of his experience and the predominance of the narration of his learning over the computerized communication. The notions or words used by the narrative voice are inserted within Imp Plus's communication with ground.

The communication between Cap Com and Imp Plus also penetrates the narrative and Imp Plus's evolution. "ARE YOU ASLEEP OR NOT, IMP PLUS. DO NOT BREAK SLEEP CYCLE BUT ANSWER IF YOU CAN" (96), says Cap Com. Later on Imp Plus connects this voice to his own speech when he was still a man: "The words he had said were "Sleep with me." But he could not remember what this had meant, if it had meant SLEEP" (111). In the novel, Imp Plus learns to be a human being again when progressively remembering his wife and the sensuality of tactile or sexual recollections. Thus, the different voices of the novel are dispersed and the

multiplicity of modes of enunciation is also a way for the reader to understand the empowerment of Imp Plus as a man. That is why Bakhtin's analysis of zone of character can be applied to the notion of voice. Each voice is not a closed concept; all voices can be considered as a zone open to connections and interrelations with other voices in the text. The text's richness is due to this communication of voices. Voice is therefore a tool that becomes this almost uncontrollable device present in McElroy's fiction. This is quite an achievement because the language used in the technological communication is practical as we have noted; it is centered on the message and not on the way we transfer it. But McElroy allows this communication to open to the rest of the text and it becomes penetrated by the sensuality of the image of the man sleeping with a woman. "Desire had met the Sun. The arcs of lumen and glucose lumen wheeled from Imp Plus and not from the Sun, but from their mingling that was deeper than touch " (112).

In the narrative itself, two other voices exist in tension to each other: the acrid voice and the good voice have a kind of fight in the novel and influence Imp Plus' behavior. The acrid voice and the good voice appear in the narration and communicate with Imp Plus.

> In *Plus*, a difficult compromise must be achieved, between impulses received from a smoke-screened Acrid Voice of paternal admonition and a maternal Good Voice that gives permission to go on. The Dim Echo of this parental machinery is his [Imp Plus] only assurance through reflective, mostly sympathetic murmurings, of his inevitably narcissistic state (Hadas 143).

The voices heard by Imp Plus influence him or his thoughts since they have him reflect on his condition, his past, his present and his future to some extent. The layers

of voices present in the novel make a complex system of contradictions and tensions between different forces represented by the voices of the novel. The fragmentation of the narration is a structural tool for the author to make us realize the complexity of human nature and put into words things that cannot really be transcribed into words.

The voice present in McElroy's novels is not harmonious, coherent, balanced, singular and autonomous. It is fragmented and excessive; it thus alters the notion of voice and we consequently discover a different use of the audible characteristics of a text. But as opposed to this traditional definition of voice, the author explains how "what [he] wanted was to maintain a tension between different voices" (*Voice* 150). My analysis of McElroy's voice is not concerned about the representation of the author in his text, since as Martin points out, "Voices, oscillate between the I and the they, the I and the us, trying either to give voice or to hear the voices of a world both making you deaf and being deaf to itself"* (45). McElroy sees voice "as a multiple thing, a thing in motion" and explains that "this connects with [his] notion of voice, not only as ambiguous and multiple, but as situated in time and in becoming, something to do with change" (*Voice* 150). Voice is not static, it is not something fixed or essential but something in becoming, in construction and different for all the novels.

The narrative multiple voices system also interact with the use of dialogues in McElroy's fiction. When Bakhtin deals with a dialogization of voices, he refers to voices that can be related to a clear source of information. In McElroy's work, some voices challenge this framework because we cannot link them to a definite character or narrator. In other words, Bakhtin's theory is challenged by McElroy's use of

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voices. The dialogues add another source of voice that networks with the voices appearing in the narration. *The Letter Left to Me* (*LLTM*) presents a different kind of structure of voice where dialogues interpenetrate narration. The narrator is remembering his past with his father (him) when the latter wasn't dead. It shows another way for voices to interact with one another.

> I have summoned him to my room as he was on his way out to dinner and he dictates out of his head an airtight definition of that large (gray? blue?) "term" *interdependence* (which sounds very even and right, no need to underline words, *he* says), while my mother's coat rustles . . . . (101)

In this passage, the dialogue is inserted into the narrative between parenthesis, and we recognize it thanks to "*he* says." So the narrative voice suddenly fades. Here, the dialogue penetrates the overall text and mingles with the process of story telling. The dialogue's voice comes to stop the narration and counter-balances it in a way. The tension between the two voices enables us to get different perspectives on the situation. The fact that the dialogue is given in direct speech lets us feel a reality effect though it is not sure that this voice is realer than the narrative voice. The narrative voice appears as a voice over commenting on the situation the dialogue is in. But the situation is not that simple because we also have other kinds of information in parenthesis: "(gray? blue?)" The information in parenthesis is not a dialogue. It is the character's thoughts on the situation. We would think that everything told in parenthesis is the dialogue taking place. By contrast, the data given in parenthesis turns out to be coming from different sources. Thus, the contrast between the different voices present in the text makes it hard for the reader to know how to interpret each kind of speech or language of the text. That is why we can deal

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with zones of voices dialoging in the text. The dialogue presents several ways to deal with oral communication in the text. In McElroy's fiction, the dialogues counterbalance or blend with the narration and it is thus hard to have a clear bearing as far as the meaning of those interventions are concerned. We create a structure of comprehension since we can determine layers of voices taking place in the text leading to different codes or frames of reading.

On the other hand, the sources of enunciation present in the novel are blurred so that we cannot rely on a clear narrator to get a sense of the text's voice. Voice is rather a collective identity than a clear single authority in the text. It is dispersed throughout different characters and the narrator's speech becomes mingled with the character's. In *Lookout Cartridge*, we need to read some passages twice to understand where the narrator shifts from the dialogue to his thoughts for instance. The text is broken into dialogues, monologue, and narration of the sequences of the film, themselves narrated or given as scripts. Sometimes, dialogues are also dramatized as in the following example:

> Nash to Gene: Tessa knew Nell!
> Gene to me: Savvy knew the husband Dudley.
> Nash to me: You were balling Tessa. Nell told Savvy.
> Gene to no one: Tessa got him into Mexican stuff, she said (486).

Every literary genre has its rules and implicitly tells the reader how to apprehend the work. When introducing theatre or cinema inside the novel, McElroy also introduces the rules coming with them in the same way Bakhtin underlines the heteroglosia of the novel when focusing on the mingling of genres. As Chénetier explains, the artifice is showed when McElroy chooses to add what is usually hidden in fiction (Nash to

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me:). This is a way to manipulate our usual bearing as far as voice is concerned in order to create fragmented and multiple voices in the novel. Narration is blurred by the way dialogues are given to the reader. When one reads, "You were balling Tessa. Nell told Savvy." We are not quite sure if Nell told Savvy "you were balling Tessa" or if it is direct speech uttered by Nash, which is probably the case here. The reader has to make an effort to distinguish who is speaking. The same problem is faced when one reads "Tessa got him into Mexican stuff, she said." In usual dialogues "she said" is put at the end of the sentence thus meaning that the sentence has been uttered by "she." Here, we have to adapt to the unclear way data is conveyed since Gene uttered "she said." The author plays with our expectations and blurs our bearings in such moments. The narration then seems to be a patchwork of information, connotations and different genres—not only literary ones.

As Kathryn Kramer puts it, "the language, in particular the syntax, becomes increasingly unstable, the voice unattributable" (83). The problem of the attribution of voices is most acute when Cartwright, hidden outside a hut, is listening to the terrorists. The impression we have when reading the book is now legitimised and almost ironically alluded to. Cartwright when trying to attribute voices to characters makes hypotheses, makes mistakes, follows new tracks: "no said the gentle voice—Paul's I thought which if so made me the third brother, Jack . . . what do we have in New York city, Jack? . . . So the deep voice was Jack not Gene" (335). Cartwright similarly guides the reader towards new tracks and dead ends. The situation becomes absurd and comical to a certain extent since we are totally lost and so is Cartwright. We get frustrated not knowing who said what and we feel at a loss inside the

labyrinth of discussion, narration, and film sequences. We are inserted into an unlinear world composed of strata of different kinds of information coming all together at the same time.

In addition to his multiplication of voice, McElroy creates a sense of orality that penetrates written words. The frontier between oral and written is not clear. For example, the mechanical characteristic of the dialogue between Imp Plus and Cap Com is close to what Ong would call secondary orality. In Ong's work secondary orality is identified with the electronic age with the telephone, radio, television and computer. Secondary orality entails a heritage both from literacy and orality: this entails delineating traits of primary orality and print. It involves a different frame and another kind of relationship between the people communicating. When inserting in writing a computerized communication which is usually only heard, McElroy makes complex the relationship between writing and orality.

When Ong studies the difference between oral and written literature, he points to oral particularities that we find in the structure of *Lookout Cartridge*. Ong underlines the fact that oral fictions are characterized by nonlinearity whereas a written fiction will use a more complex structure than reorganize events for the reader to follow the narrative linearly. *Lookout Cartridge* deals with the evolution of Cartwright, the hero of the novel, who makes a film that disappears. He realizes, by chance, that he shot some terrorists' activities and puts his life in danger while trying to understand the motives for these acts. Within seven days, Cartwright travels back and forth between New York, London, Glasgow, the Hebrides and Mount Clisham. We cannot get our bearings from chronological elements since things do not appear

linearly, as John Johnston claims, calling the narrative in *Lookout Cartridge* "laminated into a dense temporal structure" (96). The narrative keeps following Cartwright's stream of consciousness, that is to say memories, associations, or anticipated events. The unlinearity of the narrative hides the logical progression of plots the reader is used to. The unlinear and fragmented data of *Lookout Cartridge* makes the plot closer to that of an oral story.

Moreover, an oral text must use formulaic language. We find this device in writing when we read the repetitive "do you read me" of *Lookout Cartridge*, for instance. The plot cannot be linear and has to be fragmented: "Dependence on formulas gives not only a special kind of surface but also a special kind of content to messages sent in oral cultures" (*Rhetoric* 290). Using a fragmented structure to write his story, McElroy puts his text in a certain frame of mind that implicitly gives oral specificities to it; the structure of the novel is penetrated by oral specificities and is thus congruent with other kinds of orality—such as sound effects, of which we are much more aware during our reading—present in the novel. This oral aspect is thus present at a different level as far as the reading is concerned. In *Plus* and *Lookout Cartridge* voices are confronted and they sometimes branch into one another.

When we read McElroy, another kind of orality gets mingled with the narration. This voice does not come from characters but from our world:

> These books (*Women and Men* and *The Letter Left to Me*) speak in a
> mixed voice, American, every-day elaborate, technologuish,
> emotional, slang/cliché, science – some ironic manifold.
> Heterogeneous or continual or urban American, I would stress (3).

What I call vocal effect is the moment when oral particularities clearly interfere with literary style. Let me analyze a passage from *The Letter Left to Me* to show how this aspect appears in the novel.

> The woman holding, then handing over the letter to this poised dumbfounded fifteen-year-old: is the letter also *hers*? She's been busy, her hands are anything but idle here in a room of a city apartment, but today what belongs to her hands? The words are echoed-bare – a room, a city apartment – they sound rugless, not yet moved-*in*, don't they? – which is not this place at all (4).

We usually expect to be told where and when the story takes place at the beginning of a novel. Here it is "a room, a city apartment" and it is meant to be resonant since the phrase is repeated twice. The sentences are given in a written style: they are long and rather complex. However, there is something special to the opening of *The Letter Left to Me*: there are some hints of oral phrases or habits present in the written sentences. The italicized words can only be seen as underlined through writing but their being underlined also indicates an insistence on some words rather than the others. This technique lets us stress those words rather than others and it is thus accompanied by the way someone would most probably say those words when stressing them in oral communication. The last sentence of the first paragraph: "which is not this place at all" comes back on all that has been explained up to now. The place described right before is said not to be like that. This kind of incoherence or contradiction would not be shocking in oral communication. Orality accepts corrections because it is spontaneous. When one speaks, one does not organize one's thoughts as one does when one is distant in writing. The fact that the narrator allows such a correction means a lot to the text: it creates a special relationship to the narrator.

This effect might be what Bakhtin characterizes as a social language, the commonplace language penetrating literature and dialoging with it. McElroy points to phrases or intonations present in everyday life and inserts them into fiction. The heteroglosia of social discourse hierachizes ordinary languages and puts them into conflict. Vocal effects seem to contaminate the literary world and make it unstable and as Wesling and Slawek explain, " literary language . . . is not reducible to a person, but forces the reader into a furious hunt for continuity, individuality, centeredness, bounding outline, social tones of voice, most of which attributes have been eliminated in postmodern writing" (11). There is a textual representation of the oral voice, which is emphasized by the excess writing has to perform to picture such a voice. That is why Chénetier interprets the excess of orality or vocal effect on the texts as ways to manipulate the structures we usually associate with a voice in literature. What is usual in our life is revealed by contrast. In other words, the fact that words or phrases sound audible to the reader is linked to the dichotomy between this language and the style of fiction.

Our usual way of reading is challenged by use of vocal effects. Analyzing several examples, I tried to show how insistence or punctuation could create excesses that stress the presence of an oral voice in a text. This unusual proximity to the reader's oral world in literature is one of the particularities of McElroy's novels. This presence produces a sensual effect on our reading: it creates a physical presence of voice. Martin wonders, "Which term could we use to give a name to this deaf presence, in the silent body of writing . . . where the movement of the lips comes with the gesture of the hand?"*(31) He thus points out that the presence of texts is not

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presence in a Derridian sense and it creates a body rather than bringing us back to a real one. To Derrida, presence is a failure or it leads to death because somehow presence entails a constant absence leading nowhere.

> Even as it has an independent history . . . the play of structural correlations, writing marks the history of speech . . . The irruption of this absolute contingency determined the interior of an essential history and affected the interior unity of a life, *literally infected* it. It is the strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: . . . literally, it has never taken place: it is never present, here and now. If it were, it would not be what it is, a supplement, taking and keeping the place of the other (*Grammatology* 314).

But as Rabaté puts it, "a text gives a presence to read (the presence of my reading) . . . the presence of an impossible relationship to presence. But this impossible presence is the gift of reading"* (75). This presence appears when the language used calls our attention to its orality. The vocal effects make us realize that language creates the presence of our reading as the following passage from *The Letter Left to Me* shows.

> I asked what he would major in and he said Poly Sci or Ec. Ever read any Dostoevsky? *Heard* of him, is the reply, they stood him up but then didn't shoot him. But you haven't read his books? Nope. What're you going to do when you graduate? *Graduate?* he answers (139).

The narrator, a college student, is having a conversation with a friend of his, and here the dialogue is not extracted from the text and organized as a traditional dialogue once more. It is presented as a part of the narration. The fact that we do not have inverted commas makes the dialogue different from other dialogues present in the text. The dialogue presents abbreviations which make the text sound more audible since it is related to the way university students speak. The word "nope" is also characteristic of oral communication and can be considered as an oral effect in

the narration that is not really one since it is a dialogue. The italicized words make us understand where the stress is in the dialogue. The young man probably utters the word "graduate" with a note of surprise and insistence. The vocal effects of the texts make us realize that the mode of diffusion of the text is what is at stake in our reading because it interferes both with the message of the text and our reading. As Marc Chénetier explains, "Voice is never a simple channel of information . . . It is the opening up of a substance"* (361). The vocal effects produce a presence that gives substance to our reading. Henri Meschonique explains that "transformations and modulations created by orality give substance to meaning . . . A voice does not only convey meaning. It is the substance of meaning itself, and the goal for meaning"* (660). When analyzing Beckett's voice, Federman explains that the voice is self-referential and the style used is referring to the characteristics of the voice rather than to the message conveyed. The abbreviated language and the reference to oral intonations used in the passage of *The Letter Left to Me* make us realize that vocal effects are as important as the message conveyed by the words. The "PRESENT-SELF is . . . a disembodied subject . . . which performs the text rather than being performed by the text" (198). The text's voice is part of the message itself, and, in other words, the book's content is changed by the way the texture of the text changes our access to it.

McElroy underlines the physical aspect of voice when explaining that "you think of voice as having to do with breath, as the use of breath to project sound, for often [he has] come back to writing as physical—as voice is" (*Voice* 149). The relation between voice and written words gives an unusual presence to the text. To

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Barthes, in a metonymic way, the orality of the text implies the presence of a body.

The power of a specific voice enables a return to a presence in the text. Then, as the

room, the listener and the performer are part of the instrument when someone plays

music, the reader, in communion with the text enables the activation of the system

that makes it possible for the text to be animated or dynamized by its orality. In

McElroy's fiction, the reader is invited to read the multiple voices in a sensual

approach as we realize when reading the opening paragraph of *Plus*.

> 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 inside out. Imp Plus found it
> all around. He was Imp Plus, and this was not the start.
> Imp Plus caved out. There was a lifting all around, and Imp
> plus knew there was no skull. This lifting was good. But there had
> been another lifting and he had wanted it, but then that lifting had not
> been good. He did not want to get back to it. He did not know if that
> lifting had been bad. But this new lifting was good (3).

The first sentences are short and simple: they can be considered as "white voice."

Claire Fabre deals with the notion of white voice to describe Beckett and

Hemingway's style and characterizes it as an economy of language in short sentences.

The opening scene plays with the devices of symmetry and asymmetry, repetition and

creation. The first sentences are composed of five words: subject-verb-complements.

The second sentence is composed of the same number of words but the structure of

the syntax slightly changes since the "and" introduces a second verb. The rhythm of

the sentence is still close to the first one since both have five words but the balance

introduced by the "and' makes the second sentence sound different and it makes it

longer too. The simplicity of the sentences connects them but the small evolution of

the rhythm through the changes of the syntax creates another step in the entering of

the narrative. The two first verbs are in active voice. The third one, which is connected to "opened" by "and" is not in passive voice but we almost read it as passive since "opened" is associated to "closed" in our mind. This is an example of the way the text plays with the construction of an order to disorient or deconstruct it.

The relationship between passive voice and active voice is also interesting at another level if we think of the message of the novel and the way voices represent powers and lead to empowerment through language and dialogue. The following sentence lets us come back to a symmetrical movement with the repetition of "he felt it was," enabling the text to shift from regularity to irregularity and constructing a melody through this irregularity. A movement going towards the inside and the outside takes place in the beginning of the novel when we pay attention to the sentences: " It nipped open from outside in and from inside out." The movement in and out is a movement present at different levels in the novel. Imp Plus, out of the earth, communicates with ground. His brains, his mind, usually connected to inner characteristics are cut out of his body, the outer part of his person. His thoughts are expressed in words that come back to him obsessively. The image of a voice in movement coming back to a source is linked to the way McElroy deals with the notion of voice.

The process of creating a voice is linked to an outer movement in McElroy's work: there is "some source of energy coming out of a reservoir" (*Voice* 150). He also explains that he is "going back to [his] sonar image, of voice as a projection out somewhere maybe in order that it can bounce off something and bring something back" (*Voice* 150). Reading a text becomes exteriorization. The function of language

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is changed and the relationship to reading is thus transformed. For Ong, to read a text is to give its evanescence back to the text. "Reading a text oralizes it" (*Orality* 175). If "written words are isolated from the fuller context in which spoken words come into being" (*Orality* 101), then, reading a text is to bring back the context present in oral interactions. So the exteriorization of the text is due to a dialogue between reader and text since as McElroy explains, the "boomerang" (*Voice* 153)—a recurrent theme in his work (cf. "The Man with the Bag Full of Boomerangs in the Bois de Boulogne")—can come back differently and that is also why voice is linked to movement.

The physical attributes of the text are linked to the breathing pattern appearing in fiction. The inside/outside tension is a movement present in the act of breathing connected to any presence of voice. As William Wilson shows it, breathing is linked to the "image of movement - in and out." The act of breathing is between, between interiority and exteriority. Imp Plus's experience when remembering making love with a woman and progressively relearning the world through those tactile recollections is then congruent to the way the text is given a physical presence, breathing in and out. The first paragraph of the book creates a system of coming in and going out—inhalation and exhalation-like impulsions—that balances the text. The sentences branch in an excess of repetition through contamination of the repeated phrases. The repetition present in the sentence enables the inhalation and exhalation movement to take place. Beckett explains that "I think through breathing"* (164). It is interesting to see how thinking is associated to bodily functions in Beckett's mind. It is an association we can also make in McElroy's work. Although his novels involve

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a lot a specific and technical data, it does not create a dichotomy but a harmony with the act of breathing and the body of the text. The device of repetition links the different voices and it allows changes linked to breathing and its regularity, its difference in the receiving and expelling of the air. There is a movement of opening up and letting go as well as integration of the exterior, which can symbolize the position of the character giving information to get more of it.
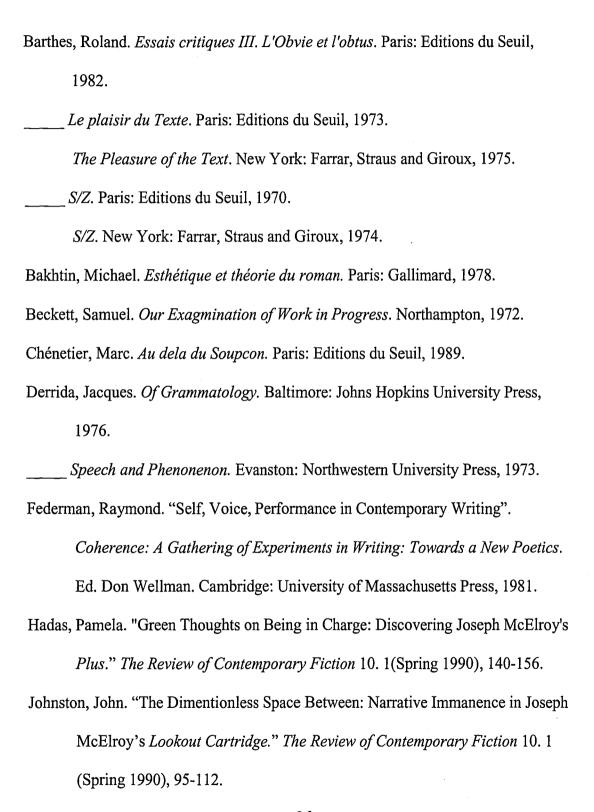
In McElroy's work, the relationship of the reader to the text is said to be complicated by the massive use of technological terminology of the author. The repetition of terms such as "chlorella" or "chloroplasts" (*Plus* 34) is not usual in literature. That is why McElroy's words are often said to be complex and cold. But we have to understand that the technological terms used by McElroy then become a component of the "grain of voice" present in the text because as Barthes explains, the "aim [of *writing aloud*] is not the clarity of messages, . . . what it searches for . . . are the pulsional incidents, the language lined in flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal symphony: the articulation of a body" (*Pleasure* 66). Roland Barthes considers the relationship to the text as a sensual dialogue and the text is then multiple because it allows the reader to add different frames to each voice. The interaction of codes becomes part of the play that leads to pleasure, and thus enables a different relationship to the text:

> Writing aloud . . . is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but with the grain of voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language (*Pleasure* 66).

The pleasure of reading is linked to the oral specificity of a text: "it produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am led to ... listen something else" (*Pleasure* 24). And this relationship between the text and orality enables an erotization of the text and the reading. The words "chlorella" and "chloroplasts" for example become part of a poetic use of language that calls our attention to "the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal symphony"(*Pleasure* 66): "the chlorella and the chloroplasts that he found himself comprehending—or seeing—and came from the unwrapping map of the Sun" (34). The repetition of the sound [k] and [ing] makes us feel the grain of voice of this passage. The grain of voice is the harmony between body and language and reading a text in an oral frame of mind is to make those two poles harmonious.

McElroy's goal is to communicate with our world. In that sense, the use of technology and complex structures in his novels is a way to enable a communication with the complexities of our hyper-technological world. The closeness of McElroy's fiction allows us to feel his words close and present so that orality guides our reading. Technology and sensuality are not opposed in McElroy's novels and this connection changes the reader's approach to fiction.

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Endnotes

The passages markes by the * sign are translated from the French edition by the author.

Vita

Flore Chevaillier is the daughter of Bruno Chevaillier and Arlette Chevaillier. She was born in 1979 in Blois (France) and grew up in France. She attended High Scholl Lycée Jean-Zay in Orléans (France) and graduated in 1997 (Baccalauréat Mention Assez Bien). She studied in a Preparatory School in Lycée Pothier for two years; transferred to Université d'Orleans, and attended Missouri Southern State College in 1999 as an exchange student. She obtained her licence (Mention Bien) in 2000 (MA) in English. Flore Chevaillier finished her Maitrise (M.A.) in English 2001 at the Université d'Orléans and wrote her thesis on Joseph McElroy: "Reading Lookout Cartridge: Mapping out a Verbal Network." In May 2001, Flore Chevaillier met with Joseph McElroy and her interview "Some bridge of Meaning: A Conversational Interview with Joseph McElroy" by Marc Chénetier, Antoine Cazé and Flore Chevaillier was published in *Sources* (Paradigme, Orléans, 2001). In 2002, she completed her Maitrise (M.A.) in French as a Second Language at the Université d'Orléans. She has been studying for two years at Lehigh University as a student in the Masters program and will graduate in June 2003. She taught French to intermediate and elementary student at Lehigh University from 2001 to 2003.

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