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“The Pastoral Ethos of Joseph McElroy’s Mute Philosophy. *Lookout Cartridge* and *Women and Men*”

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Abstract: This article begins by proposing a very partial reading of *Lookout Cartridge* as a means of opening the way to a more comprehensive analysis of *Women and Men*, an analysis which restricts itself, however, to a treatment of the main “man” of the novel, James Mayn, and in particular to his relation to his apparently suicidal mother. In doing so, it attempts to conceptualize various pastoral themes and intentions that appear in McElroy’s writing, finding thereby a way of rendering an account of the author’s anti-paranoid stance with respect to science and technology, and enabling certain observations on the viability of an eco-critical approach to literature. The main objective, however, is an attempt to understand McElroy’s intention to “transmute” our technological fears without merely rejecting them, which involves a fundamental rethinking of the Art-Nature, *Technè-Phusis* conflict at the heart of the pastoral tradition. This rethinking, as it is deployed by the text of *Women and Men*, enables a radical critique, or better deconstruction, if the word may still have some pertinence in our world of commodified concepts, of Western power and the will to domination and destruction that appears infinitely capable of ignoring itself. What McElroy’s pastoral ethos finally amounts to is a respect for the enigma of appearance in its difference from nature, an ethos which neither dominant modes of power nor eco-critical approaches to its catastrophic effects seem eager to acknowledge.

Résumé : cet article commence par proposer une lecture très partielle de *Lookout Cartridge* afin d’ouvrir un chemin vers une analyse de *Women and Men*, une analyse qui se borne toutefois à une discussion de l’« homme » principal du roman, James Mayn, et tout particulièrement à la relation de celui-ci avec sa mère apparemment suicidaire. Ce faisant, certains thèmes et intentions pastorales qui apparaissent dans l’œuvre de McElroy sont abordés, dans l’optique de rendre quelque compte de l’attitude de l’auteur vis-à-vis de la science et de la technologie modernes, lequel permettra par ailleurs quelques observations à propos du bien-fondé des approches éco-critiques de la littérature. L’objectif principal, cependant, consiste en une tentative de comprendre l’intention, tel que la formule McElroy, de « transmuter » nos craintes technologiques au lieu de les fuir simplement, intention qui implique la nécessité de repenser de manière fondamentale le conflit Art-Nature, *Technè-Phusis*, qui est au cœur de la tradition pastorale. Cette pensée, telle qu’elle se déploie dans le corpus de *Women and Men*, permet à son tour une critique, ou mieux une déconstruction – si ce terme peut malgré tout encore garder une quelconque pertinence pour nous aujourd’hui – de la volonté de puissance occidentale et d’une volonté de domination et de destruction qui semblent infiniment capable de s’ignorer. Ce en quoi consiste finalement l’éthos pastoral de McElroy est un respect pour l’énigme de l’apparence dans sa différence vis-à-vis de la nature, un éthos dont ni les formes dominantes du pouvoir ni les approches éco-critiques qui tentent de prendre en compte les effets catastrophiques de celles-ci semblent vouloir reconnaître.

Key words: appearance, dissimulation, ghostliness, *Lookout Cartridge*, Joseph McElroy, paranoia, pastoralism, shock, technology, tropology, *Women and Men*.

Mots clés : apparence, dissimulation, fantomal, *Lookout Cartridge*, Joseph McElroy, pastoralisme, paranoïa, choc, technologie, tropologie, *Women and Men*.

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What we are lacking is to dare to conceive that existence isn’t in its truth unless, between the two limits of an absolute finitude – birth and death –, it devotes itself to the uncovering and the expression of the idealities, that is, the unreal formalities where *how* the real is what it is comes to appearance. Painting, but also music, and eminently poetry, are modes of achieving this task, where the aforementioned formalities are themselves enclosed in the movement of the materials of Art. Art is mute philosophy.

Gerard Granel (2009 86, my translation)

What is the pastoral convention, then, if not the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural? [...] There is no doubt that the pastoral theme is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that it is poetry itself. [...] The pastoral problematic [...] turns out to be the problematic of Being itself.

Paul de Man (1983 239-240)

I know of no better description of what I’m willing to suggest is the task of Joseph McElroy’s writing than this definition of Art as mute philosophy offered by Gerard Granel, a French philosopher, I should add, whose thought has for reasons which are themselves germane to the subject of this paper resisted academic commodification by Anglophone “French Theory.” But let me come to this definition later, and begin by clarifying the first phrase of my title, which a text by Paul de Man, himself an “allergen” to academia, as J. Hillis Miller has called him (2001), alongside work by other literary scholars, will help me elucidate.

It may on first sight appear disingenuous to associate the word “pastoral” with the work of McElroy, a postmodern American author whose writings are renowned for their affiliations with technology and science. Nothing could be further from McElroy’s sensibility than the flight from urban complexity and the naïve idyllicism that is often associated with the pastoral ideal, notably in its folkloric and consumerist images. Leo Marx, in his landmark *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), these days read primarily as a proto-ecocritical text, argues however that the pastoral tradition in American literature begins not with a sense of harmony with nature, but rather with a sudden consciousness of the machine in nature’s midst, and not with the shepherd’s possession of an Arcadian realm but with the latter’s felt dispossession of it. Marx posits two kinds of pastoralism, a simple and a complex, the first escapist in its idealisation of the simple life in a green pasture, the second creative and properly literary in the awareness it displays of technology as a “counterforce” to the idyllic vision (Marx 25). A “root conflict” between the machine and the garden, technology and nature, underwrites in Marx’s view the creative efforts of writers as diverse as Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Twain, Henry Adams and F. Scott Fitzgerald. And the shepherd, often of course a poet (or writer) in disguise, does not, at least in America, herd sheep, but stands out, Marx insists, as a mediating figure who “seeks a resolution of the conflict between the opposed worlds of nature and art.” (22) Rather than harmony, it is ultimately a sense of awe, terror, and powerlessness (a theme I shall return to) that these writers display as witnesses of a “tragic doubleness” at the heart of the human condition (349).

McElroy’s well-documented but perhaps less well-understood optimism with respect to technology appears to set him in stark opposition to Henry Adams, the penultimate witness, in

Marx's book, of this "tragic doubleness." McElroy distinguishes his work from what he calls the "pessimistic tradition" that he sees taking hold in Adams and gaining ascendancy in the work of contemporaries he admires like William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover (1987b 150-51). The connection he establishes, however, both in interviews and in the body of the novel itself, between James Mayn, doubtless the main character of *Women and Men* and the author of *The Education of Henry Adams* (1987b 153; 1987a 636, 653, 962) points to an identity of interests, if not of perspective, between the two authors: one, the modernist visionary of the *Dynamo* and the *Virgin* as an all-embracing conflict between technological power and sublimated sexual vitality, and the other the postmodern novelist of considerably less fatalistic views concerning what Adams sees as a Manichean clash between two modes of production. Joseph Tabbi has pointed out that what postmodern authors like Gaddis, Pynchon, McElroy and DeLillo have in common with Adams is a "self-consciousness" that is "deeply rooted in the materiality of contemporary forms of production" (Tabbi 23), and this suggestion is valid and directly pertinent to my approach here. What distinguishes McElroy's work from that of authors like Gaddis and Pynchon, however, derives from a fundamentally different conception of the materiality of production and from his singular revision of the "root conflict" that Marx situates at the core of the American pastoral tradition. What I wish to suggest is that it is precisely the revision of this conflict, of "the great Art-Nature antithesis which philosophically is the basis of pastoral literature," as Frank Kermode puts it (37), which enables Mayn to overcome his Adamseque world-sickness and nostalgia, in *Women and Men*, and which, more generally, underwrites McElroy's stance against the pessimistic tradition and the paranoid tendencies that Pynchon, for example, has inherited from Adams.

"The possible nightmare of being totally controlled by unseen agencies and powers is never far away in contemporary American literature," Tony Tanner noted in his introduction to *City of Words* (16). McElroy may well have been one of the authors Tanner had in mind when he penned his introductory remarks to his survey of American fiction of the '60s and early '70s, but the pastoral ethos that I shall argue is important to a full understanding of McElroy's stance proceeds from an ability to resist this nightmare, not by a stoical streak merely, although an admirable steadfastness and an Emersonian (or simply Yankee) breed of optimism are distinguishing traits of the author, but by means of formal production. "What I am after," McElroy writes in an essay describing his manner of composition, "is some sequence of contemplation that will use and transmute certain sources of our fears without merely rejecting them." (McElroy 1974b).¹ It is of course the formal means or the technical ability by which these fears are transmuted that place McElroy in a position to chastise, albeit always in a friendly manner, two divergent approaches he discerns among his contemporaries: on the one hand, writers whose parodic or satirical stance enables them to defend themselves inside their own fictional fabrications against the dread of System America, as he claims is the case with John Barth in his "pastoral parody" *Giles Goat-Boy* (1992 31); on the other authors like Norman Mailer, himself parodied in *Ancient History*, for what McElroy sees as an outmoded heroic response to the threat of ego destruction that technology poses. *Women and Men* is inscribed in what McElroy calls a "total ecology" (1992) that can be understood neither as a fictional superstructure that defensively abstracts itself from its environment nor as a negation of it in a would-be first step in its dialectical recovery.² The kind

¹ "I wanted composition that would not deny the impersonal clarities of modern systems any more than deny what's really touched in Gary Snyder's 'Some Things to Be Said for the Iron Age.' [...] I have felt, or hoped, that there may be something else in the styles of efficacy which machine and system open to the mind. I am trying to find a way which can use unsatirically the very styles of abstraction that are part of processes we are right to fear." (McElroy 1974b)

² McElroy discusses elsewhere the "closed form of the design" of Barth's fictions which, as he puts it, "don't have the full risk and force and play they might otherwise have" (McElroy, 1987b 155). See "Holding With Apollo" for other remarks on Barth and Mailer and for a succinct introduction to McElroy's take on modern technology and its

of stability or equilibrium, not to say resolution, that McElroy seeks in our postmodern phase of the great Art-Nature, or better, *Technè-Phusis*, conflict, resembles perhaps the surrealist approach to this antithesis more than it does that of his contemporaries, if one recalls not only surrealism's probing of the limits between the inside and the outside of the work of art, but the fact that it took for its basic ambition the liberation of language from its utilitarian and instrumental functions and that it sought in doing so to transform human society.

It is difficult these days to discuss pastoralism without engaging the post-pastoral stance of contemporary ecocriticism, and this is all the truer here given McElroy's own interests in environmentalist thinking.³ McElroy's conception of a total ecology is one which includes what post-pastoral (and frequently anti-pastoral) ecocritics persist in calling "nature," but does not, like many of the latter, presuppose a continuous presence understood as the homogeneous ground of technical production. Timothy Clark, who has written widely and perceptively on ecocriticism and been critical of its realist and often simplistically positivist perspective, notably in the work of Laurence Buell, suggests that an "ethical response to nature becomes possible only when we are faced with the *impossibility* of reducing it to the homogenous, the continuous, the perceivable, the thematizable" (Clark 21).⁴ Such an impossibility of reducing nature to a homogeneous ground upon which technological, artistic and socio-cultural forms in general can be conceived as superstructures also appears central to McElroy's environmentalist thinking, most explicitly perhaps in essayistic writings like "Attractions Around Mount St. Helens" ("But what is environment?" he therein asks persistently [McElroy 1996]) and his forthcoming non-fiction book devoted to the subject of water, to judge by fragments which have been published so far (McElroy 2004, 2010). Rather than being conceived as an underlying principle of continuity, nature, in McElroy's perspective, appears no less textual, in a sense, than the writings dealing with it, due in part no doubt to what we nowadays know about the genetic inscription of natural organisms, or what Timothy Morton calls "environmental textuality" (Morton, 2010 3),⁵ but also because of his scepticism regarding epistemological claims of the ability to speak on behalf of nature.⁶ McElroy rejects therefore the traditional logic of metaphor, according to which art interiorizes and appropriates nature – eats and devours it, as the ecocritics are doubtless right to remind us –, and substitutes for it a logic of homologies, transpositions, conversions and transfers which situate the inscriptions of natural organisms in a total ecology alongside economic, political, cultural, technological, cybernetic and other discourses. This ecology, understood therefore not as a pre-established ground of human reality but as a holistic, yet discontinuous, series of mediums in which human realities are constituted, might be qualified as a "large endless harmony" (287) as the Druid, punningly named *Andsworth*, puts it in *Lookout Cartridge*, McElroy's 1974 novel dealing in part with a terrorist organisation's use of pastoral ideology, and in which Stonehenge appears, in an image Leo Marx would have admired, as a "Stone Age computer" (346).

tendency "to erase or *revise* [my emphasis] the great single and possible Self at the core of our Western tradition" (McElroy 1973).

³ One of the aims of this paper is to provide a response to the ecocritical critique of pastoralism, which is often misguided in my view, as will become apparent; but this response is too dependent on other points that need development to be offered in exclusion of them, hence what may appear as a rather discontinuous treatment of the subject.

⁴ I should point out that Clark is quoting Ted Toadvine (2003).

⁵ Morton writes: "We can abandon all variations of Romantic vitalism—believing in a vital spark separate from the material organisation of life forms. [...] When we zoom into life forms, we discover textuality." (Morton, 2010 5) Despite reservations I have about Morton's empiricist conception of textuality, this formulation can be considered valid, I think, in its assertion of a textual ecology that exceeds human modes of production. McElroy, I believe, would agree.

⁶ "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning." (McElroy 1992)

Lookout Cartridge is a novel in which two ecologies of being are set in violent opposition to each other: on the one hand resentment at a perceived loss of individual autonomy in a managed and mediated culture fuels the terrorists' revival of cults ("the trend toward eastern modes, organic community, dislodging from city" [McElroy, 1974 70])⁷ and an interest in ritualized forms of experience focused in part on Stonehenge; on the other, a more abstract attempt to surmount mediated existence by bringing all things to consciousness, to acquire a comprehensive view, or "lookout," over the plurality of media that determine subjectivity. Far from achieving this higher synthesis, however, a form of mediated immediacy that would return transparency to consciousness by subsuming the media ecology in which it is grounded, what the latter produces is instead delirium from information overload and, much more importantly from a phenomenological perspective, intense awareness of the gaps and differences *between* discourses, cinematic and verbal, for instance, to mention the two dominant tropes of the text. From the beginning critics have had little difficulty recognizing the phenomenological intentions of the novel, even as they have seen these intentions extending themselves in the cartographical project of mapping experience from the a priori foundation of medial discourses, a structuralist extension, in short, of the Husserlian aim of grounding the self-identity of consciousness on a transcendental basis. As suggested above by my doubtlessly partial, but not inaccurate, I think, interpretation of the key term "lookout" as a place of medial transcendence, a certain linguistic idealism appears, if not to command, at least to inform McElroy's quest to establish what Tony Tanner called an "ultimate topography" of cognitive experience (Tanner 1987). If McElroy stopped there, however, we could treat *Lookout Cartridge* as another benign attempt at a Systems Novel and look elsewhere for a model of escape from our technico-historical impasse. But this idealism paradoxically proves productive, counter-productive in the infinite closure of the system, because the medial discourses, or better perhaps, the eco-technic reality in which the mind's activities are grounded, is revealed as extending consciousness far beyond the confines of any "intentional" end, hence as escaping from self-reflexion and sublation within consciousness; more simply perhaps, the drive towards totalisation, the point where cognition would become total in the mapping of phenomenal experience, transgresses itself, liberating experience of its drive for cognitive power. This transgression of cognitive limits is dramatized as the exposure of the subjectivity of its main character, William (Mercury) Cartwright, map-maker, indeed, as the name suggests, to a "god-like" state of "in-betweenness." Corresponding with a complete loss of cognitive power, the insight that Cartwright attains in these moments of transgression is paradoxical, to say the least. What is presented to consciousness is mediation itself, not the thing or the reality presented by mediation. It is a mode of insight in which the impossibility of perceiving nature or reality as a homogeneous, continuous, thematizable presence is directly faced, insofar as it is at all proper to speak of "facing" pure difference. If McElroy doesn't hesitate to dramatize it as god-like, such insight should not be distinguished from ordinary experience. Cartwright's consciousness becomes "god-like," or, in a less allegorical, Kantian philosophical register, transcendental to the extent that it uncovers and, *impossibly* of course, identifies itself with the condition of consciousness, which, as the term "betweenness" suggests, turns out to be pure difference.⁸ Cognitive power is lost in these moments because such insight

⁷ See Campbell for a discussion of the historical subtext of the terrorist organisation, interpreted as a reaction to disillusionment following the failure of '60s political movements to effect change in an increasingly technocratic society.

⁸ Interpretations of *Lookout Cartridge* as between phenomenology and structuralism have become a critical orthodoxy (Tanner [1987], Tabbi, Johnston), yet the "between" is often more an afterthought than the main focus in studies of the novel. Although the title of the article may appear to suggest otherwise, John Johnston rightly insists at the end of "Narration, Delirium, Machinic Consciousness," on the "gaps" and the "discontinuities," and affirms that "consciousness must be said to arise or to constitute itself *in* a difference and *as* a difference, a difference that requires different media of perception and recording for its articulation." (1998 121) My focus here will be almost exclusively on these gaps and discontinuities, and on the ways in which they paradoxically "constitute" Cartwright's way of being in the novel.

interrupts, as Cartwright is himself able to observe, subjectivity instead of grounding it. At the same time it opens consciousness to what can only be called perhaps a kind of visionary faculty, albeit a fundamentally mediated one (“If I am a god, it is precisely because I am not independent” [420]), that divines rather than perceives reality, intuits its place in the medial ecology, whence the strange sort of epistemological liberty of the vividly detailed descriptions of the “field” in which Cartwright’s mind is felt to move (“My mind played in the field of someone else’s inventing, more than one someone, I thought.” [359]). The effect, which is difficult to present without quoting large extracts of the text, is something like what Henry James manages to convey in “The Turn of the Screw” when the governess’s vision is suspended by specular presentations of linguistic mediation, resulting in the retreat of presumably stable ontological notions like *life, reality, nature, experience*, but in a way which is devoid, of course, of the governess’s reactionary hysteria and which extends itself farther into an eco-technical reality that James’s own media-savvy consciousness could only have predicted (see “In the Cage”). The perceived interruption of the referential myth of correspondence between representation and reality, that myth which underwrites, for example, the novel’s terrorists’ discourse – and appears to inform the contemporary ecocritic’s militant “referential sickness,” as Tom Cohen puts it in his de Manian commentary on the “*eco-catastrophic* imaginary of today” (Cohen 116, 114),⁹ – becomes, in the cool-headed exaltation of Cartwright’s sublime visions, a liberating suspension of the experiential fallacies that underwrite cognitive power and its authority.¹⁰

I shall return to Cartwright’s “god-like” insight in a moment, but let me first point out that such defusing of the cognitive authority of mass-mediated consciousness is one effect of McElroy’s writing to which we might attribute certain “curative powers,” to borrow Kathryn Kramer’s expression (Kramer 80). Kramer, however, is speaking of the way McElroy’s texts have of restoring a sense of the human to experience which is progressively exposed to the inhuman materiality of technological mediation. The pastoral ethos that I identify with McElroy’s anti-apocalyptic, anti-paranoid stance is not a humanizing consolation for technical deracination, but rather its tropological definition as a form of literary experience. Such a definition would appear not to exclude the humanistic interpretation that Kramer offers, since the pastoral is by definition, it seems, an anthropomorphising trope. But, as trope, the pastoral is also capable of recognizing itself as such, in a self-reflexive turn that undoes its own organicist fallacy. One need only read *Hind’s Kidnap. A Pastoral on Familiar Airs*, which the author insists is not a satire, to see that McElroy is abundantly, if not unreservedly, aware of the generative and proliferating power of the trope to produce meaning far beyond any possible reduction to its organicist premises. The (dis-)organizing principle of that novel can be said to be the very separation between consciousness and nature that Paul de Man, in his comments on William Empson’s *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, from which I quoted at the beginning of this paper, emphatically declared to be inherent to the pastoral convention: “What is the pastoral convention,” we read, “if not the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural?” By “eternal” separation, de Man of course means absolute, irreducible, which perhaps explains why the pastoral convention cannot even be restricted to specific modes or genres of poetic writing, for there is “no doubt,” he writes, “that the pastoral theme is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that it is poetry itself.” Such a generalization of the mode’s significance (which McElroy, I think, also recognizes in his manner) is perhaps inevitable to the extent that one understands what Kermode called the philosophical antithesis at the basis of pastoral

⁹ On the anti-theoretical turn in ecocriticism, see, besides Cohen, Phillips, Clark, and Morton (2007).

¹⁰ See Joseph Tabbi’s discussion of “sublime referentiality” in his reading of *Plus* (Tabbi 143). Defining his notion of the sublime in a way that could also be applied to *Lookout Cartridge*, he writes: “The construction of a self-image that is at once outside and inside consciousness – and finally incapable of representing itself to itself – is [...] characteristic of the paradoxical structure of the sublime.” (151) It is of course this state of betweenness, inside and outside consciousness in Tabbi’s formulation, which determines the primary signification of “lookout” in the novel (“right now I felt between. Like a lookout” [McElroy, 1974 174]).

literature in a truly ontological manner, as de Man does: “the pastoral problematic” – which Empson discerns as the disguised or secret basis of Marxist thought (Karl’s not Leo’s) in the chapter of *Some Versions of the Pastoral* that de Man is commenting on – “turns out to be the problematic of Being itself” as it “is lived by any genuine thought.”

De Man is insisting here, despite the allusion to “any genuine thought,” on the fundamental disposition of literary thought, that expressed most notably in the pastoral tradition, to resist cognitive relapse into the fallacy of a possible reconciliation with nature. To resist falling into a certain referential *sickness*, as Cohen emphasizes, which must of course be the condition of any responsible eco-critical or environmentalist thinking. The eco-catastrophic imaginary – as a paranoid reaction to technical deracination and a supposed loss of “natural” environment¹¹ – is perhaps one of the first symptoms we must treat if we are to have any hope of saving life on earth. It is at any rate precisely this disposition, this stance or this ethos, of resistance to *falling* for the naturalisation of reference (the word is important, we shall see, in *Women and Men*), which turns out to have a “curative” or “homeopathic” effect in McElroy’s writing. But let us simply retain for the moment this possibility of a healthy, “patient” pastoralism, a pastoralism that is more capable of resisting “falling into the traps of impatient ‘pastoral’ thought” (de Man, 1983 241) than the social (Marxist in Empson’s chapter on proletarian literature that de Man is discussing in the late ‘70s) or meta-social (think eco-critical) forms of thought which have depended on it for their own emergence and development.¹² For better than any ideological pastoralism (the kind de Man refers to between quotation marks) that aspires to the overcoming of the alienation of self and the renewal of man’s relationship to nature, pastoral convention knows that “the gap that cleaves Being” (de Man, 1983 245) is the very possibility of sentient experience.¹³

Dissimulation

A brief example from *Lookout Cartridge* can suffice to show how McElroy’s pastoral ethos originates not as a counter to our techno-scientific alienation and destruction of nature, as in the ecocritical perspective, but, more fundamentally, as a response to its ontological retreat. In a moment of reverie, Cartwright alludes in a curiously duplicitous manner to a sense of intimacy with nature that he shared one day with a friend: “an illusion of April intimacy that I now see has also intimacy’s authentic shiver, at least for me who was between.” (382) The temporal difference that is evident here between the sense of “illusion” and that of intimacy’s “authentic shiver” attenuates what is often, in McElroy’s fiction, a more direct, more shocking revelation of what we might call, after Blanchot in his revisionary reading of Heidegger, the “dissimulation” of being. What is exposed here, and yet sheltered at the same time, by its temporalisation, is the gap that cleaves being, as de Man puts it, and which no human agency can claim responsibility for; nor, of

¹¹ Timothy Morton qualifies the kind of referential sickness he sees in eco-criticism as “ecomimetic” (Morton 2007), a trope suggesting sameness between representation and the thing represented and which refuses, of course, to account for difference. Tom Cohen, in the article referred to above, reads Morton’s critical diagnosis of ecomimetic sickness as de Manian, pointing out that de Man’s writings themselves appear curiously exiled from it, however, which is itself, he argues, a symptom of how radically intolerant we have become to what de Man’s writings have to teach us about our current conditions.

¹² For a succinct overview of ecocriticism’s emergence from the pastoral tradition see Gifford (2017).

¹³ Given the ontological definition of pastoral offered by de Man and, somewhat less emphatically, by such prominent specialists of the mode as Empson and Kermode, I shall not attempt to formulate a notion of “post-pastoral,” as many critics have done with respect to what convention dictates I nonetheless call postmodern writing. The historicisation of the term seems to me to be of limited pertinence, at least for my purposes here, although it is not without interest in various attempts that are currently underway to critically identify and explain the persistence of pastoral intentions and themes in 20th and 21st century writing. An interesting overview of such attempts can be found in the closing chapter of Frank Gifford’s *Pastoral*, and in Joshua Corey’s “A Long Foreground: Exploring the Postmodern Pastoral.”

course, be blamed for. An illusion appears here *as* authenticity appears – albeit with the important temporal difference I’ve indicated, diminishing the force, but not the value, of the revelation –, interrupting what we normally mean by cognition, in this case precisely the cognition of nature. Nature recedes in its very presentation, or presents itself as a receding of presence. If such revelations are “intimations of immortality,” as McElroy suggests (437-438), echoing *Wordsworth’s* poem on that subject, it is because such revelations interrupt temporal experience, expose consciousness to its transcendence, to a gap or a difference which is the very possibility of temporal experience. Temporal experience supposes a spacing or spacing-out of the antithetical notions (from a cognitive perspective) of “illusion” and “authenticity,” appearance and presence. In other words, it is time itself that veils, in a certain manner, the dissimulation proper to being, which the narrative act in McElroy attempts to recover. Our chronological conception of time, which the traditional realist novel reinforces in its narrative form, itself veils a more authentic notion of time as the *temporalization* of the dissimulation proper to being. The plethora of media technologies that McElroy employs in his fiction, from film cartridges to computer discs and so on does not alter in any fundamental way being’s “own” dissimulation, but veils the experience of it, even as, in a certain manner, it democratizes it, carrying it over from the Wordsworthian, rural sublime into the modern sphere of urban experience. Conceived, in Janus-like manner, both as a barrier to the disclosure of dissimulation as an ontological principle and as its historical repetition in the modern world, the veil of technology determines both the ideological blindness and reactionary violence of the terrorists in *Lookout Cartridge* and the negative, pastoral insight of its main character. Only the latter, of course, is productive of narrative and of the kind of radically de-instrumentalized and de-aestheticized language which comprises McElroy’s fiction, which, while transgressing the public codes of syntax and semantics, resists the reduction of language to a merely sensuous medium in a vain attempt to compensate for a loss of natural plenitude. Indeed, the shock that the revelation of dissimulation provokes in consciousness, or, on a slightly different level of its apprehension, the shock that the revelation of mediation entails for self-consciousness, is nothing less than the *coup d’envoi* of narrative process in McElroy. An example of such a shock and its irruption as the originating instance of narrative (and lived experience) is offered by Dagger, a friend of Cartwright, when he tells the story, which he likes to repeat, “about his uncle Stan in Yonkers who got one of the old wire recorders before the war and when he heard his voice on it he got a whole other idea of himself, grew a moustache, and left his wife and went to live in New Jersey where he became a phone salesman for encyclopaedias.” (97) Medial shocks like this one interrupt, or cut across, subjectivity conceived as a structure of possible self-return, and trigger otherwise unlikely and altogether unexpected series of events. McElroy’s fiction itself appears to spring from the shocks that the short-circuiting of normal mediating process triggers, where the mind captures momentarily its transcendence, its ecstatic exposure and “god-like” liberty from cognitive (and linguistic) order and authority.

The ruptures that medial shocks like this provide, and which are disseminated throughout McElroy’s fiction, are in fact generalized, eco-technical instances of what J. Hillis Miller has called the “linguistic moment” of literary creation, that moment when “the relation of poetic language to something outside language represented by language is broken in the transport of the caesura.” (Miller, 1987 41)¹⁴ As a polymath of considerable eco-technical awareness, McElroy is able to

¹⁴ What Miller calls the linguistic moment has of course been studied by other critics and theoreticians of literature in the wake of the post-phenomenological “linguistic turn” that occurred in literary studies in the United States in the 1970s, a turn which has since degenerated unfortunately into various historicisms, culturalisms and, more recently, ecocriticisms, which tend in their compulsion to humanize and naturalize reference to resist what is misguidedly regarded as the mere “textualism” of deconstructive approaches to literature (see Buell, for example, in his misleading and caricatured rendering of modern critical theory and what he calls the unfortunate “divergence between commonsensical and specialized wisdom” with respect to literary representation [83-88]). As I’ve already suggested, the main “allergen” in the late 20th and early 21st century academic retreat from theory has been Paul de Man, for whom the turn in question is interpreted as “allegorical” in his *Allegories of Reading*. No less important from

apply the negative, poetic insight of the caesura to discourses often considered alien to literature, like environmental science, cybernetics or information theory, for instance, since the materiality of these media necessarily entails the same irreducible opacity that literary authors have recognized in poetic discourse. McElroy situates himself thereby as a kind of middle-man, a mediating figure between these discourses, which partly explains no doubt why critics like Kathryn Kramer, alluded to above, find that his writings have a “homeopathic” effect. The critical approaches to McElroy’s texts which are based on cybernetics or information theory, however limited they are due to their emphasis on these systems themselves as analogies or as collaborative discourses, instead of on the gaps between them, are themselves testimony of the dissemination of a “moment” which one would be mistaken to reduce to a purely linguistic origin, since it depends on the materiality of logical formalities inherent to the media ecology in general.¹⁵ But language is clearly the basis of this insight which enables McElroy to find vitality in technical processes that subvert the organic conception of human life as an immediate or unmediated principle.

It is an insight that Henry Adams seemingly lacked, and which underwrites McElroy’s persistent return to pastoral themes as a way of retrieving, in a certain manner, the Art-Nature, or *Technè-Phusis*, difference. A thorough analysis of such themes would have to include a discussion of *Hind’s Kidnap. A Pastoral on Familiar Airs* (1969) the author’s “city-pastoral” as he calls it (McElroy 1974b), whose main character is a shepherd in a linguistic field of proliferating signs, and whose quest to retrieve a kidnapped child turns out to be the impossible pursuit of a man in search of his own abducted innocence; the city/country opposition that helps structure *Ancient History. A Paraphrase* (1971); the meditation on the word “green” in *Plus* (1977),¹⁶ McElroy’s “extra-terrestrial pastoral,” as one might call it, which enacts the gradual retrieval – on the part of a disembodied brain orbiting the planet in outer-space – of the memory of a man whole and on a beach, in love back on earth, a novel wherein a truly radical separation from nature turns out to be the condition of its fragmentary recovery in the memory of the linguistically re-embodied brain; the terrorist pastoralism and its counterforce in *Lookout Cartridge*, to which I have alluded; the pastoral education that James Mayn will have received from his maternal grandmother Margaret in *Women and Men*, itself mediated by her reading of Cooper and Emerson, and above all by her intimate knowledge of the West and of the Navajo past out of which she weaves the fabulous tales whose recollection will help enable her grandson to recover from childhood trauma and to overcome a particularly inhibitive form of technological paranoia (part of her own formation even involves an 1893 visit to the World’s Fair in Chicago similar to the one Adams writes about in “The Dynamo and the Virgin”); not to mention the author’s environmentally minded essays, the fragments of the water book, and if possible the still awaited book on grain that was conceived, the author tells us, as a late 1980s version of *Walden* (1987b 159). These are but some examples of the pastoral themes and intentions that emerge in McElroy’s work. Frederick Karl has said that “there is in McElroy some of that nostalgia for an America which was, once, Edenic, or thought to be; the New Zion, the new earthly Paradise,” and insisted on the

my own perspective, regarding notably what Miller calls the “caesura,” is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading of Hölderlin, notably in “The Caesura of the Speculative.” Perhaps closest however to my own approach here, in its borrowing from Granel’s post-heideggerian assessment of language, is Christopher Fynsk’s *Language and Relation ... that there is language*, where some of Heidegger’s insights into language are filtered through readings of Blanchot, Benjamin, Celan and Irigaray. Finally, on the word “eco-technical,” see Miller (2012).

¹⁵ See Yves Abrioux (2001) who, in seeking to correct “the excessive abstraction of the cybernetic approach” to his work, offers what are to this date probably the most detailed and insightful analyses of the formal structure of McElroy’s fiction by developing the figure of the “vectoral muscle” that appears in *Hind’s Kidnap* and that the novelist discusses in “Neuronal Neighborhoods.” See notably, at the end of the article, his discussion of the interplay between affect and percept in his close reading of fragments from the opening chapter of *Women and Men*, offered as a “prolegomenon” to a more extensive reading of the novel.

¹⁶ See Pamela White Hadas’s “Green Thoughts on Being in Charge.”

“extremely difficult quest for retrieval” that this nostalgia entails (Karl 193).¹⁷ This is doubtless true, and one would be well advised not to underestimate the affective force of a nostalgia which perhaps only the best or the most disciplined writers of the pastoral tradition have been able to counter. For it is not merely the postmodern generalisation of the conflicts and tensions inherent to pastoral writing, their application to global culture and mass technological production, which makes McElroy worth reading today. What makes him pertinent for us is above all the depth of his revision of the pastoral ethos, the disclosing (or retrieval) of a mode of formal production which, as we must now attempt to identify more precisely, enables critical resistance to the techno-scientific and capitalist modes of production which are responsible for contemporary threats like global terrorism, financial meltdown and anthropogenic climate change (and the eco-catastrophic responses to the latter). This singular and finite mode of production, grounded in literary awareness or knowledge but not limited to it, is knotted with – not to say grounded in – an affective force or drive, inherent to the pastoral tradition, which doubtless originates in an inconsolable sense of loss. If, in affective terms, the pastoral drive finds its origin in a wound, a violation, a loss seemingly too outrageous for consciousness to endure – one need only think of Imp Plus’s traumatic separation from the green earth – then it follows, as McElroy has said in an interview, that all his novels are “psycho-philosophical mystery stories about the self putting itself back together again.” (LeClair 78). Attempting to uncover the means or the ability by which McElroy “transmutes” our technological fears will ultimately necessitate an approach to the shock or trauma which is to affective life what the gap that cleaves being is to the world in its structure of dissimulation.

The World as Appearance

This assertion that the world, not in some abstract objectivity, like the supposed “object” of science, but in its appearance, possesses the structure of dissimulation as the ontological principle elucidated above can be verified by examining more closely a few of the “God Mercury Cartwright”’s (352) statements about being. Let me begin by recalling an instant the example of nature’s dissimulation discussed above: “an illusion of April intimacy that I now see has also intimacy’s authentic shiver, at least for me who was between.” What is essential here, to put it now in slightly different terms, is the awareness of an irreducible *figural* in the revelation of nature, the awareness of an irreducible mimesis in *alētheia*. Far from being of peripheral significance in the novel, as the quotation of such a fragment might suggest, this awareness is central to Cartwright’s way of being and is expounded by him in various ways, most notably through his use of a certain Hindu concept employed by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* and by Nietzsche in the early chapters of *The Birth of Tragedy*, according to which there is an irreducible *Māyā* in the presentation of what us moderns call truth. That is what it means for “authenticity” and “illusion” to be one. Cartwright puts it this way, to his wife Lorna, in *Lookout Cartridge*:

I told Lorna that in Hindu thought *Māyā* has opposing qualities. It is a force of illusion, and illusion is inferior to truth, and truth lies beyond the senses. But *Māyā* is also a force of illusion that helps us to believe in this same world the senses give us, and this makes *Māyā* a force powerful, even good. (204)

For Cartwright world is appearance, the product of a “force of illusion” which is inferior to truth but makes truth accessible. *Māyā*, like the Greek *mimesis* (a term which McElroy, like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche before him, does not use perhaps because of its reductive interpretation as “imitation”), opens up the eidetic in the sense that it makes appearance

¹⁷ Tom LeClair has also discussed McElroy’s quest for retrieval and his “urge to master the relations between America before the Age of Information and life in the present.” (LeClair, 1990 260)

believable, and installs a world which the senses give but fail, of course, to apprehend. This is a theoretical way of saying what any reader of McElroy's text already knows, perhaps, in short that the sensuous cognition of objects – a comb, a bar of soap, a glove reaching into a laboratory container, to borrow almost at random a few prominent images from the text – is never an immediate perception but always already determined eidetically. As a force of illusion, or mimetic faculty, *Mâyã* provides the formal structure of appearance without which things themselves would not appear. But it is less things themselves, or even the world itself installed or presented in this manner, that interests Cartwright, than the process of installation or of presentation itself, in other words what McElroy, in an important essay, calls the “untouchable processes beneath appearance” (1974b). As a mercurial figure, Cartwright's place is “irredeemably between” (358), as he puts it, never amidst things or amidst reality in its presented appearance, but rather at the “gap” between illusion and truth where things appear as such, where presentation or appearance occurs. “I am *Mâyã*,” he declares (388). Hermes-figure, mediator par excellence, middle-man, or *Da-sein* in person, we might say, evoking Heidegger, Cartwright is there where being presents itself, that is, at the place of its dissimulation, and bears the hyperbolic responsibility in the novel of making the world believable, not as an objective reality – the background against which events occur in a traditional realist novel – but in its constant coming-into-being as appearance.

Mâyã, therefore, as a certain mimetic technique, or *technè*, is productive, not merely imitative. When we read, for instance, at one point in the novel: “Between this and what happened next, I knew myself to be adequate” (389), what we are confronted with is precisely the hyperbolic responsibility to *be there* – being's shepherd, Heidegger, a pastoralist after all in his manner, would say –, to be present there where there is no presence, ecstatically exposed to the void of a difference, to transcendence, that is, once again, to the essential finitude which is the condition of temporal experience. To be productive in this sense, that is, to be *Mâyã*, is to be possessed of, or rather *by*, a “god-like” power that dispossesses the personal self of all volition, which is why the “visionary” faculty alluded to above is an impersonal one (“I lacked a core of personal vision” [407]).

The drama of McElroy's fiction, which critics have often discerned to be phenomenological in nature, is in appearance itself. Rather than presenting events *in* the world, its task is to present the world as appearance. As Cartwright explains to his friend Kate: “*Mâyã* means the world is not separate from me.” (370) This is not a solipsistic assertion. What is thematised here is a fundamental shift from the traditional understanding of the separation of the object from the subject, that metaphysical mode of difference which both determines and is radicalized by modern science, to a manner of being-in-the-world wherein the world itself appears as an attribute of the “god-like” Cartwright. As our reading advances we shall have to find less allegorical means of describing this manner of being. For the moment, what is important to recognize is that for Cartwright world and appearance, being and appearance, are one, and this appearance, or phenomenon, if one prefers (since appearance does not present itself as appearance merely but as reality), requires the “betweenness” of a finite being which exists, in the strictest sense of the term, by virtue of its participation in the medial ecology of what one might call Being itself. This awareness of existence is what determines the apparently hyperbolic responsibility, from Cartwright's perspective, of eidetic production: “so that the world comes to be believed in, between us and the truth” (388). In other words, so that “truth” remains a possibility for us. Truth is not the unveiling of presence, as in the metaphysical perspective, but the unveiling of the world in its appearance, that is in its irreducible figurality, which only the finite tasks of the mimetically astute middle-man, so to speak, the man of difference – not the industrious and self-possessed entrepreneur, whose productivity eludes him in the infinite production of the techno-scientific capitalist complex – can engender.

Cartwright's ethos, then, his way of being, and above all perhaps his extraordinary sense of responsibility,¹⁸ place him between "art" and "nature" in a way that resembles the conflict of the pastoral hero as it is described by Leo Marx, but alters the terms of this conflict considerably, precisely to the extent that the humanist perspective of *The Machine in the Garden* is determined by the metaphysical opposition of subject-object. It is necessary therefore, if we are to comprehend this ethos as something other than merely a postmodern version of Marx's pastoralism, to adjust our approach to the conflict, understanding Cartwright's manner of being as closer to Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world" than to modern humanist interpretations of being as a subjective core of individuality, spirit or consciousness, in an objective world.¹⁹ Harry Mathews, in his reading of *Women and Men*, the novel to which I shall turn in a moment, says that there is an essential "giving up of whatness" in McElroy's writing (Mathews 221), which is another way of observing that the central task of the writer is not to imitate reality but to show, as we've just seen, *how* reality comes to be believed in. Mercury, of course, is a figure of the writer, and an underworld figure at that. As a god, he is in the world but not of it. How is one to grasp this difference, this betweenness, and its significance for the writer? Understanding this difference in non-metaphysical terms requires a basic rethinking of language, in short of the difference between our utilitarian and instrumentalist conception of language – proper to the "subject" who has fallen from Māyā, from betweenness, from finitude, into the degraded conception of reality that modern techno-scientific and capitalist modes of production depend on and hold in their grips – and language in its eidetic function, that is, as a **productive** force responsible for the coming-into-being of what we call reality. I began this paper with a quotation from Gerard Granel which suggests that such giving up of "whatness" in turning to the "howness" of being involves, as he puts it, "the uncovering and the expression of the idealities, that is, the unreal formalities, where *how* the real is what it is comes to appearance." These "idealities" – found nowhere in nature – which enable nature to appear, or these "unreal formalities" – found nowhere in reality – which enable reality to appear, are uncovered pre-eminently in language (in what Paul de Man, who was not a philosopher but a reader of literary texts, teaches us to see in the rhetorical properties of language). Therein lies the essential difference, the essential betweenness, that Cartwright's manner of being asks us to comprehend. His betweenness can be considered as a kind of recovery from the oppressive lure of the subject-object relation, which is really no relation at all, according to McElroy, in the form of awakening to an uncanny awareness of the eidetic formalities – found nowhere in things – which enable things themselves to appear. If, borrowing Granel's definition of Art, McElroy's fiction can therefore be considered as a "mute philosophy," it is not of course because it would consist of some kind of application or dramatization of a pre-baked philosophy,²⁰ but because it is a *latent* expression of what the novelist calls those "untouchable processes beneath appearance," a formal, not thematic, attempt to uncover the conditions of reality. As we shall see, the so-called muteness of this art is also its force. It uncovers not descriptively, but in a performative manner.

Minding the Gap

¹⁸ An apparently hyperbolic sense of responsibility for the world is typical of McElroy's characters, all Holden Caulfields in their manner. Tony Tanner discusses this will "to 'protect,' be a 'saviour,' support and 'shepherd' others, be a moving watchman in the city [...], a guardian," as a "prototypical stance [...] *vis-à-vis* the world" in his essay on McElroy (1987 215).

¹⁹ See William S. Wilson's discussion of the importance of the notion of "field" in McElroy's writing; he writes: "the hero is intelligible as a region of a field, not as a sphere or core of individuality which passes through a field in fulfillment of a destiny." (Wilson 2012). Wilson's conception of being "fielded" seems not incompatible with the Heideggerian notion of "being-in-the-world."

²⁰ McElroy discusses the difference between fiction as a merely "dramatized" philosophy and the "physical thought" of writers he admires like James, Nabokov and Bernhard, where he claims the "working spirit" of the philosopher is evident, in "Socrates on the Beach: Thought and Thing" (McElroy, 2002 9).

Nietzsche's final insight may well concern rhetoric itself, the discovery that what is called "rhetoric" is precisely the gap that becomes apparent in the pedagogical and philosophical history of the term.

Paul de Man (1979 131)

"Cover" is an important word in *Women and Men*, where it is used precisely to describe what cognition does (see notably the chapter entitled "IN FUTURE"). James (or Jim) Mayn, I've said, is the principle character of the novel, and given what I've related above about Cartwright ("I am Māyā"), it will be unnecessary to dwell at length on the suggestiveness of that name. The name is also curiously duplicitous, however, since, if his father's name is Mayn, his mother's, before marriage – an important theme in *Women and Men* – was Mayne. Sexual difference therefore is a silent, graphically inscribed difference, suppressed (or covered) in speech. It returns, however, in the *writing* of *Women and Men* – or in what, beyond the oppressive and repressive discourse of speech, McElroy has called "language's ability to express itself" (1987b 145) –, and it is partly this return which, at the thematic level, delivers Mayn from his Henry Adamesque paranoia regarding technological production.²¹ "Hypothetical Man" (McElroy, 1987a 337),²² "ad hoc Man," "Recycled Man" (236), James, "that Mayn of many turns" (596), is a journeyman reporter who makes his living on information. He is by turns a climate change expert, a specialist of South American political economies, a dabbler in geothermal physics and astrophysics, among other things. He remains throughout, however, "ordinary" Mayn (411), a postmodern "Man Without Qualities," McElroy has elsewhere suggested (1987b 157). He is also "Divorced Man" (260), but in memory at least he is usually only separated from his wife, as part of the novel is devoted to his working towards what some might consider the paradoxical successfulness of their separation. He has a girlfriend, no less interdisciplinary than he, who reads "anthro-historico-botanico-technologico-linguistico tomes" (234), and who also has a role to play in his recovery, as does a woman named Mayga (resembling Mayn in her "Māyān" or mimetic faculties) who is adept at telling things "slant." "Political terrorism" (overflowing from Pinochet's fascist regime) with "its quiet linguistic routine" (579), which I understand as a smothering of Māyā (Mayga is in fact assassinated it appears by one of Pinochet's hitmen) and the reduction of language to its instrumental and *violently* utilitarian functions, is again the distorted mirror of the protagonist's uncanny resistance to power and the authority of the System.

Call him a typical shepherd-writer of little pretence to an identity of his own ("white, male, middle-aged, lapsed agnostic, middle-class routinely-married-then-sleazily-single newsman-oid" [668]). He is always "in two places at once" (242, 538, 1052), for example the two households he was raised in, his mother's and his grandmother's, or else rural New Mexico and urban New York, but, more importantly, Mayn oscillates in mind between the small New Jersey town he grew up in – its "green streets" (861), among other things, recalling the generic pastoral space between wilderness and city – and a technological future of daunting inhibitive force which in paranoid fashion he strangely intuits he already resides, or has come from, having been projected there, he discerns, as an effect of the traumatic event of his mother's suicide, which occurred when he was fourteen years old. More daunting than Adams's Dynamo, the technological future Mayn imagines is one where heterosexual couples are sent to colonize stations in outer-space, called "L5 libration settlements" (666), where their sexual identities are fused into one.

²¹ In truth, McElroy's narrator (if one can speak of *one*) appears to see paranoia already in Thoreau: "so Eco can be transformed into Physics in another space or in another space translated into English where another maniac wielding a borrowed axe by Walden Pond can huff and puff, 'But lo, men have become the tools of their tools'" (McElroy 1987a 302-03).

²² All further page numbers given without reference to the work are from *Women and Men*.

If Mayn, in his manner, is ultimately no less a mercurial figure, a middle-man or man of difference, than Cartwright, his (re-)awakening²³ as such depends on his working back towards the traumatic event at the origin of this paranoid projection of himself, an event which remains beyond the reach of cognition, and constituting a gap in knowledge that the “subject,” of course, cannot grasp: “probably he was in shock from his mother’s suicide though why didn’t he feel so?” (843) Such a shock, I’ve already suggested, is the affective equivalent of the ontological shift or transfer that McElroy seeks incessantly to recover in his writing, and which is most succinctly thematized perhaps in *Hind’s Kidnap*, where it is figured as a bewildering abduction of a child: “how like our own life is this event!” exclaims the awe-stricken shepherd of that novel to his estranged wife Sylvia, “Before we can even wake up into our strength, we are transferred, injured, stunted into a new scene we aren’t familiar with. Later we are made objects and priced.” (McElroy 1970 231).²⁴ The transfer to an unfamiliar “new scene,” which in turn becomes the possibility of life’s objectification and commodification within the capitalistic-scientific complex, takes in *Women and Men* the paranoid form of transfer to a space station where the “stunting” or the “injury” is of a more explicitly psycho-sexual nature (very much in tune with Henry Adams’s worries), but the “event,” the irretrievable anteriority of which corresponds with the transfer from “nature” to “world” and “life” to “existence,” is identical from an ontological perspective.

As we shall see, the “event” of Mayn’s mother’s suicide amounts to a radical confrontation for her son with the dissimulating structure of being itself, that is, with the withdrawal of being inherent to the presence of being. To employ what are doubtless two of the most prominent words in the novel, the mother’s suicide is what provokes the affective encounter with the “gap” or the “void” of a difference which divides being, and which in turn is disseminated in the “total ecology” of medial discourses that disclose reality as regional or local phenomena: anthropological, historical, biological, economic, political, astrophysical, etc., all of which preoccupy Mayn in his vocation as an itinerant reporter. Since, as we know, it is less these realities themselves, which generally conceal their appearance and remain closed to the question of being, which interest McElroy than the gaps between them and the task of uncovering the conditions of their appearance, my focus here will be on what is doubtless Mayn’s most important encounter with finitude in the novel, his haunted recollection of his mother’s suicide, that “event” which, more than any other, determines his way of being in the total ecology as a (discontinuous) whole.

Mayn, as the name suggests, is productive of illusion, that kind of illusion which is generated the more hyperbolically, it appears, the more exposed its subject is to the gaps in being, the temporalisation of which – we saw a brief example of its structure previously – takes on a particularly aberrant and destabilizing form in *Women and Men*. For whereas Cartwright could say: “Between this and what happened next, I knew myself to be adequate,” affirming in this manner his god-like responsibility for the world in its coming-to-appearance, Mayn, always “in two places at once,” is paralyzed by difference and suspended in a present that is split between a “lost origin” and the “future” into which the shock of that loss has projected him. This is how he explains it in the story he often tells, sometimes to his estranged wife Joy, sometimes to his daughter “Flick” (whose given name is Sarah, the name of Mayn’s mother) or to his son Andrew, usually over the telephone, which is an important mode of relation, or of “*telepathic separation*” (1051), in the novel:

²³ The theme of awakening after a shock to a renewed awareness of reality is constant in McElroy’s work; he describes his writing in a radio interview with Michael Silverblatt as “an attempt to respond to the shock of being alive with a dissolution of everything that we’ve been prepared to lean on, so that [...] we have a model for waking up all over again.” (McElroy 2003b).

²⁴ The theme of the abducted child that fascinates Hind is really, of course, a trope reflecting the irretrievable anteriority of Hind’s own “kidnapping” (as the double genitive of the title suggests), that is, the unknowable “event” of his own coming into being (having nothing, of course, whatsoever to do with his “biological” birth).

Somewhere two people are turned into one; yet witness another One [Mayn himself], lone species offspring from these preceding two; and as he, this One, looks back to them, who were not much together and preceded each other when departing, he can't see quite where they went; and, deserted by that origin, this One feels thrust from that loss into the future, where he should be glad to be because, newsman as he becomes, it's where tomorrow's news is; but he *isn't* glad, because bringing some bits of that aborted origin always along with him jetsam of a mystery far more intelligent than he which is partly the Shock of his unhappy mother once upon a time disappearing into the elements, he has on just one side of his mind the lone One of himself evolved adrift from that lost origin as if to find it in the future where he travels —

(whew! a lighter voice exhales returning or retelling the riddle to its subject on another late night). (1042, see also page 994)

This is a hyperbolic description of the sense of loss that is doubtless at the basis of all pastoral literature, a “loss” that projects itself by a proleptic leap into the future where it assumes the figure of what might have been, but is not, triumphal plenitude. Instead, the figure of that plenitude, the One, looks back on loss in apocalyptic terms – the outer-space station of colonists suggesting, as in *Plus*, the privation of earth – and encounters itself in the future as the reflected image of a primitively desired unity of being, the image, in other words, of what would appear to be a secret longing for primordial androgyny. If this compensating figure or fantasy of plenitude, this “technological bad joke” as McElroy has himself called it (1987b 162), is ultimately undone and the One revealed as multiple, it is only to the extent that the paranoid or catastrophic sense of selfhood is suspended, as occurs, we shall see, in Mayn's haunted daydreams of his mother. Yet it is not the proleptic structure of the temporality that is revealed here which is itself aberrant, for, as suggested previously, the temporalisation of the gap in being is precisely the means by which it can be humanly endured. For this reason, Mayn will never overcome his sense of being “in two places at once,” the future and the past, because this divided way of being is, indeed, the only way of being in the present: “the Present, which was really the past from the vantage of that future he had gone into like a shock of memory which gave off a desire to return to what was a void and had to be reinvented, namely this present” (407). Given the “void” in being of which the “shock of memory” is the trace – a shock belonging of course to an irretrievable anteriority – the present is never, phenomenally-speaking, present. The catastrophic imagination, however, transforms this lack of presentness into a vertiginous and mystifying oscillation between the future and the past, the two poles that constitute the present, just as the gap or the void of the origin is itself conceived in metaphysical terms as a lack of presence, or deprivation of being, which in its turn sets in motion the vacillating oppositions between absence and presence, emptiness and plenitude, nothingness and being that are suggested in the above quotation; in other terms, given Mayn's curious “embarrassment” regarding his mother's suicide (639, 799, 813), which I shall return to in a moment: an oscillation between a certain sense of impropriety, on one hand, and propriety, property or appropriation (as the phallic projection of Oneness suggests), on the other. Unable to fill the gap at the core of being, the paranoid or catastrophic imaginary transforms what might have been a sheltering temporalisation of it into a dizzying spiral of oppositions vacillating violently between the two poles, in a gesture which both conceals a more authentic relation of the self to its origin, which Mayn will gradually recover, and heightens the sense of loss conceived from the proleptic and symptomatic perspective of fantasized plenitude. Of course, it is only because he has already to a significant extent worked his way back towards that loss that Mayn is able to consider the scene he has “fallen” into (868, 876, 885) – the futuristic scene of the technical usurpation of gendered psyches – for what it is, a paranoid reaction that is typical of Western culture itself, “more fearful and less original than dabbling imaginers had already worked out” (1053), which covers a more authentic relation to (the gaps in (the total ecology of)) Being.

This compensatory reversal of past and future is furthermore incomplete. For if Mayn “isn’t glad” about having fallen into the future it is firstly, it appears, not as a result of the inhibiting consequences of it, but rather because he is obliged to carry with himself a remainder of the “aborted origin,” the “jetsam of a mystery far more intelligent than he”. It is this “jetsam” that he must work through, a word of peculiar and powerful affective associations due to his mother Sarah’s having presumably drowned herself at sea.

Significantly, Sarah’s death, if I am not mistaken, is *never* named as such by Mayn in the text, unless precisely to *suspend* belief in it – “the long, days-long moment of his mother’s death, if there *was* one” (656, emphasis in text) –, as if it were not death itself but the *impossibility* of death that her “dying” leaves her son bereaved with: “you might have thought [...] Sarah was still dying, strangling in waters so deep and cold they *preserved* you [...] from ever putting her out of mind” (670, emphasis again in text). Mayn returns obsessively to this event, which of course can scarcely be called one, or rather this “event” returns to him, haunting his daydreams in the course of the novel. Irreducible, it seems, to death, Mayn’s mother’s “unburiable suicide” (814) is figured with a host of euphemisms, or litotes, all suggesting a withdrawal or slipping away from (her son’s) life. His “long withdrawn mother” (993), we read, is described as having “vanished into the sea” (569), or as having “disappeared” there (442, 443, 872), or as having “absented herself” (404, 848) or else as “being not present anymore” (639). Figured as “departed” (799, 808), “lost” (798), “passed away” (600, 603), his mother’s “sandy, watery leave-taking” (821), is an event that curiously embarrasses the son, perhaps, Mayn surmises afterward, because “if you could be embarrassed [about a terrible, paining, destroying, living thing like that] maybe that meant his mother [...] was not dead” (814-15). But also, no less significantly, because such a slipping away shames knowledge, consciousness into an awareness of its limits: “it was awful, it was as embarrassing as something he might never know” (813). Embarrassment, then, is the sign of cognitive authority’s resistance to its own powerlessness, its response to a “catastrophe” (538-9) more shocking than negation itself, which Mayn attempts to compensate for, as he discerns, by thrusting himself into the future.

The Will to No Power

If the world is the will to power and we ourselves are this will, as Nietzsche puts it, what are we to make of the will not to have power?

Joseph McElroy (2003a)

In reaction then to what cannot even be described as a painful *experience* of loss, Mayn becomes a “ghost” to the present (989), the principle effect of which is perhaps the withdrawn form of relation, or drawn-out separation, that he repeats with his wife Joy. If this separation ultimately proves to be a success, it is above all precisely due to James’s having worked his way back into the “mystery” of his withdrawn relation to his mother, rediscovering in the repercussions of the shock a more authentic relation to being. Working his way back into her loss, “for which there was no word, not even the one they gave it beginning in *J*” (800), an other mode of separation, non-catastrophic or non-paranoid, reveals itself not only as the most viable but also, in a sense, the most faithful form of relation in the novel, just as the acceptance of a certain ghostliness is revealed as the most authentic way of being in a present that can never, of course, be present.

His recovery then occurs not in the form of any kind of accomplishment, nor even revision, of the will to power which underwrites his paranoid flight from finitude, but precisely as an interruption, or better suspension, of this flight by what Mayn, back in his formative years, had called a “will to *no* power” (574). McElroy has himself said that the novel is partly about

“powerlessness” (McElroy, 1987b 163). As we are now in a position to expect, far from being the effect of an ego diminished by the domination of technology as the accomplishment of modernity’s will to power (Mailer’s nightmare), this powerlessness might be qualified, borrowing Harry Mathews’ phrase, as an “inspired acceptance” of finitude (Mathews 225),²⁵ a radical acceptance of a slipping away or of a withdrawal which, as we’ve seen, is irreducible to death as the simple negation of life.

The enigma of this acceptance is the central enigma of *Women and Men*. For how is one to conceive of the acceptance of such a passivity, as one might call it, a passivity which offers no hold even for the slightest prerogative, the slightest intention? How can such powerlessness constitute a manner of being? Rather than attempt to respond directly to these questions, it is necessary to consider in more detail the slipping away or the withdrawal from presence that Mayn encounters, reencounters in his daydreams of his departed mother. For if this encounter, to the extent of course that it can be called one, is an encounter with finitude, with the gap or the void in being that Mayn never ceases dwelling upon – “the gap of his mother” (901); “this gap a part of you was always passing through” (903); “a gap he saw back into that was his own ongoing mystery” (907), etc. –, this finitude is expressed as a *voise*, a voice which emerges precisely as a resonance or an acoustic effect of the void: “[his mother] then, as a future absence, brought herself close inside her offspring, furnishing a gap where [...] her voice would sometimes resume” (197). More generally, finitude is expressed as the *material* and *tropological* resonance of the gap, as is suggested by the insistent manner by which the mother’s presence is identified throughout the novel as a sort of acoustic auto-affection of the void – as both her melancholy and her violin-playing suggest²⁶ – and by the even more insistent manner by which she is associated with *turns* and *curves* and *bends* which are themselves the figures of (the gap in) being as a tropological phenomenon. Of the human, if one prefers, as a tropological animal – and “producer” thereby (although this production is irreducible to any faculty of the subject) of the eidetic phenomenon we call reality. Mayn, that “man of many turns, an itinerant chronicler” (894), that is, a man of language, a *writer*, however modestly, works his way back to the rhetorical conditions of being through his paradoxical relation to his mother, by recalling, for instance, “the curve of her slow sweep through the rooms of the house” (583), “the curve of the small of her back” (590), or “the wind his poor mother carved [...] curved by whim of some swerved splinter in the groove of her unwed brain” (669), to offer just a few examples of the *curves* with which the mother is physically, corporally associated throughout the text, as though her memory in her son’s mind were an embodiment of language in its originary, tropological function.

²⁵ Yves Abrioux writes that “*Women and Men* voices an [...] uncertain acceptance of the cognitive breakdown which accompanies an event that registers predominantly in terms of affect.” (2001 49). This is an admirably concise formulation of what is perhaps the novel’s basic poetic principle, and a formulation which only apparently contradicts Harry Mathews’ more affirmative assertion of “inspired acceptance,” for Abrioux goes on to show how the cognitive breakdown in question is the condition of what he calls the “non-organic bodily functions” that contribute to the novel’s “particular narrative impulse” (analysed in a fragment from the novel’s opening chapter dealing with the “event” not of death, which I am focusing on here, but of birth). The difference between the two formulations, between an “inspired” and an “uncertain” acceptance, points rather to a fundamental ambiguity in the suspension of cognitive power that is central to McElroy’s writing.

²⁶ For example: “he [...] wanted to hear the interruption no the interrupted phrases of her violining cross slowly, back-tracking in order to go ahead, halting upon a gap, her whole self or life, or just music, get it right, go back, go back, go back again and get it right” (392). I should point out that Julia Brooks, David Brooks’ mother in *A Smugglers’ Bible* is a violinist too, and, like Sarah Mayn, is preoccupied with death, as is evident in chapter three of the novel where she spends her day haunted by the image of a dead girl she discovers in a tabloid. The violin is associated with the mother as an acoustic – and properly speaking pre-figural presence – as is suggested by Mayn’s allusion to his mother’s “musick womb” (601), a subject I shall return to further on. McElroy’s own mother, apparently, was a violinist (McElroy, 1990 27), as is the mother in *The Letter Left to Me* (1988).

If these visions or hallucinations, recollected in the body of the text, are uncanny, or better *unheimlich*, it is precisely because they uncover what normally is covered or concealed,²⁷ nothing less than those “untouchable processes beneath appearance,” as McElroy calls them, which are grounded in the tropological properties of language, in what de Man calls the “rhetoricity” of language, emphasizing with this neologism the irreducibility of the rhetorical properties of language to the classical conception of tropes as merely imitative or secondary with respect to supposedly proper meanings (de Man, 1979 175). If these daydreams are emotionally powerful, it is because they paradoxically touch not the affective source of existence – there is no affection prior to existence –, but the source of affective life in the dissimulating structure of existence itself: in short, the presentation of life as a retreat of life. Such is the “mystery” of the “origin” that Mayn works his way back into, uncovering in the haunted reveries of his mother’s tropological withdrawal from being – “his day-dreams of a near-naked mother (never turning around yet turning and turning and turning in the sea like just a body)” (645) – nothing less than the source of his own existence. I shall offer a more detailed reading of one such reverie further on.

Being-in-the-World

and if the gap or void was different from him, it still gave off a scent of almond, nature’s unsalted, unskinned almond, sweet wood (1031)

The enigma of an inspired or uncertain acceptance of finitude is also then an encounter with the tropological character of language which is covered in the utilitarian and instrumentalist conception of it on which techno-scientific and capitalist modes of production depend. If this encounter enables Mayn to overcome his eco-sexual-catastrophic imaginary, one should not be surprised that he is never more than “half-convinced” of its paranoid nature (1053). That he remains only half-convinced attests to the fact that no cognition of the tropological materiality of language is possible. Only a certain hauntedness testifies to the “presence” of it. Mayn’s hauntedness is an ampler, slower, more meditative version of the “god-like” awareness – corresponding, one will recall, with a loss of cognitive power – attained by Cartwright in *Lookout Cartridge*. If “the world is the will to power and we are this will,” the “will not to have power,” in suspending who we are, cannot possess the power or the authority of a conviction.

Yet nor can this will to *no* power be negated. Not even the infinite negation of science – an infinitization increasing exponentially at both micro and macroscopic levels (or sub-micro and super-macro, etc. *ad infinitum*) can negate it,²⁸ which is why Mayn, projected into the remotest outpost of being in man’s techno-scientific flight from finitude, remains haunted by the figure of his mother’s departure. The dissimulating structure of being eludes reduction to the dialectical oppositions of being and nothingness, plenitude and lack, and of future and past as a synthezizing totality in which the present could finally be lived as fully present. Will to power and the enigmatic will to *no* power, infinite production as the astro-geo-bio-physico-mathematical

²⁷ This, of course, is precisely the definition that Schelling gives to the *unheimlich*, which Freud borrows: “everything is *unheimlich* which ought to have remained secret and hidden but which is unconcealed.” (Freud 200)

²⁸ Infinite negation which is also, needless to say, infinite production, as is suggested on numerous occasions in the text with respect to the futuristic colony in outer-space that Mayn fears he has come from; here is one comic example: “and the colonists will be doing their future farming under ideal conditions getting eight hundred and fifty pounds of grain per acre per day just like the desert greenhouses on the southeast shore of the Persian Gulf speed-picking tons of potatoes grown with unsupported roots – vegetables prospering on Styrofoam boards and spin-off colors spraying the roots that hang down below. We’re maximizing milk production using tomato-vine-fed goats that weigh a tenth of what a cow weighs but give a quarter as much milk which will be all the sweeter if you keep the billies back on Earth and inseminate by space shuttle.” (420)

exploitation of “nature” (the universe) and the finite production of eidetic realities which haunt the catastrophic, paranoid *infinite*isation of finitude, these are the two poles, non-dialectical, and therefore in constant disharmony with each other, that constitute the narrative dynamic of *Women and Men*. They determine, among other things, the multiplicity of strange, uncanny doublings and resemblances that occur in the novel – including Mayn’s (perhaps sibling) rivalry with the sinister Ray Spence (echoing that of Cartwright and the terrorist Len Incremona in *Lookout Cartridge*) –, a discussion of which would unfortunately lead beyond the scope of this paper.

Here we must consider how Mayn’s hauntedness is the condition, or *in*-condition rather, of a recovered sense of being-in-the-world. This may seem paradoxical. Working back against his sense “that a world for which the word *world* was wrong was happening to him” (1053) – back against that “world” which, as McElroy suggests, “is” the will to power – what is restored is not the world in some more positive, concrete or objective sense than previously, but the world as appearance. Such an awakening, or re-awakening, to the enigma of appearance is precisely what is occurring in Mayn’s hallucinatory daydreams of his mother. What he is awakening to, in other words, is the difference between nature “itself” and nature as an eidetic reality, or, as we read, between the “organic natural” and “the human brain’s troposphere of endless economixes” (881). As in *Lookout Cartridge* where the hero becomes aware that the world is not “separate” from him and that his “god-like” manner of being involves an exorbitant responsibility for the coming-into-being of appearance, Mayn, working his way back from his catastrophic worldlessness, recovers a productive or a performative manner of “seeing” which, in a certain manner, retrieves being: “And so he would try to get away from that distant future through which he fell, by seeing such other times as perhaps had not been altogether lost and seeing them so well that they came back into being” (1053).

A reading in its entirety of the long sentence from which this fragment is taken would enable us to recognize that being-in-the-world in this sense involves, along with the productive or performative mode of “seeing” that is evoked here, both personal and political responsibilities that Mayn’s paranoia had caused him to ignore. But the productive or performative nature of this seeing – “seeing such other times as perhaps had not been altogether lost and seeing them so well that they came back into being” – is vital. It is also the essence of what I’ve taken the risk of calling the pastoral ethos that is apparent in much of McElroy’s work. This attention to reality not as an object but as appearance which appears precisely as an attribute, not of a subject, of course, but of a retrieving mode of consciousness which, moreover, is conscious of its responsibility for retrieval – however hyperbolic, or indeed, impossible this responsibility is from the point of view of the subject – is pervasive in McElroy’s writing. This responsibility is impossible, yet the world would not exist were it not for the existence of Ma(y)n, not, once again, as a Subject, but as the singular being (*Dasein*) whose existence or exposure to finitude constitutes the “site” or “position” of eidetic production in the impersonal “field” of language.²⁹

Mayn’s becomes haunted then by the awareness of an impossible responsibility for being, that is, by the uncanny awareness of the figuring or eidetic properties of speech. His quest for retrieval (which is also that of the author, who shares the same initials as his protagonist) is founded on the basic ontological truth that nothing is lost that language, in the idealities or unreal formalities enclosed in its materiality, can speak. Yet, as the other side of this same truth, *everything* is lost, with the advent of language that separates being from itself, and which, however, differs that

²⁹ This is an allusion to William Wilson’s important essay on McElroy, “Fathoming the Field.” If Wilson’s conception of being “fielded” seems not incompatible with Heidegger’s notion of “being-in-the-world,” as I suggested earlier, we might also interpret Mayn’s paranoid projection of himself into the future and his consequent sense of worldlessness as a case of “unfielding” himself: “unfielding oneself is the offense for which fieldlessness is the punishment” (Wilson 2012).

loss.³⁰ In other words, the essential finitude of being is given before the world itself appears as the retrieval of being, a retrieval which is finally based not on nostalgia at all perhaps but on a deeper, more radical, orphic claim to reality. Loss, of course, is the condition of retrieval, but unlike the nostalgic longing for presence, conceived as absent, which thereby veils from itself the essential finitude of being, the mode of retrieval that determines Mayn's being-in-the-world is a productive mode which depends precisely on an intense awareness of finitude, and is strangely, stubbornly reluctant to suppress it. That is why "the slow or endless poetry of being aware, of being conscious," as McElroy writes in a mordant and penetrating remark about the human condition that hasn't the slightest trace of sarcasm, can "mak[e] the life of awareness seem like a slow suicide." (457) The life of awareness can seem like a slow suicide because finitude, mortality has been accepted, and in that sense given to oneself, from the beginning, yet differed. And that differed acceptance, which at its limit is an utter paradox, a masking of what has always already been unmasked, and hence a knowledge or an awareness concealed from itself, is the precise inversion of the catastrophic imaginary and its temporal hysteria that we saw previously. This type of awareness gives poignant and specific meaning to the enigmatic Latin phrase: *Et in Arcadia Ego* (I, too, lived in Arcadia; even in Arcadia there is death) that was sometimes found as an inscription on tombs in pastoral landscapes of the Renaissance painters, for it comprehends death not as an empirical given but as the transcendental condition, or *in-condition*, of the life we humans live on earth. Such an awareness is perhaps what the pastoral tradition has always sought to teach, and it is this awareness which is the possibility of Mayn's recovered sense of being-in-the-world. This awareness is impossible in essence, that is, essentially veiled from itself, and yet it is able to account for itself and for being in its finitude, as for example when Mayn observes, admirably: "and if the gap or void was different from him, it still gave off a scent of almond, nature's unsalted, unskinned almond, sweet wood" (1031). Reality, nature presents itself not in itself but precisely as a mode of appearance mediated by an unknowable void in being and by the idealities or unreal formalities of speech in its vernacular materiality – "almond," "unsalted," "unskinned," "wood," "sweet," etc. – whether *transcribed* or not by what McElroy calls (without being in the least bit "poetical") "the poetry of being aware, of being conscious." Using a botanical term, as seems appropriate here, we can say that there is a fundamental "dehiscence" in being, that is, in the almond, whose perceivable presence, even purified or distilled to the sensible apprehension of its "scent" (one of the least mediated of sense perceptions), is an effect of language. I am calling "pastoral" awareness this awareness of nature as a rhetorical "gap or void" in being, or better perhaps, this awareness of the retrieval of nature in its unreality or ideality from the abyss of being, and which furthermore is aware of itself as such.

One understands now why death is such an important figure in *Women and Men*, notably with respect to Mayn's recovery. Death, not of the self, but of the other, is the ultimate *figure* of the retreat from presence that being supposes, the ultimate figure of finitude which, as we have seen, is given in being's dissimulation, not its negation. Death itself is not the negation of life in McElroy's novel – we never learn if Mayn's mother really died or not – but the ultimate figure of its withdrawal in its very donation.³¹

It is only because of this radical awareness of death, not, once again, as an empirical reality but as the transcendental *in-condition* of the "life" we humans live, and because of the ability to withstand the *unheimlich* effects of its figuration, to which we must now return, that the writer –

³⁰ By "language" I mean in general the sign, the trace, the mark whose identity discloses "things" in distinguishing itself from them, if only by its very repeatability or iterability, which is already, of course, to say its ideality (see Derrida, 1990 105).

³¹ Death as unknowable in itself and therefore only as figure is a frequent topos in the writing of Paul de Man; it is commented on at length by Derrida in *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, which is also itself a meditation on the tropological and its relation to death, loss and memory. See notably "L'art des mémoires" (Derrida, 1988 59-94).

Mayn the itinerant chronicler – can reclaim a relation to being that modern science and technology have taught us to ignore. No doubt nature presents itself “poetically” first – before becoming the “object” of infinite research and the “harnessing” of “its” energy –, that is, in its figural or eidetic difference from itself. But the possibility of Mayn’s slow, indeed unending, awakening to that truth is the uncanny returning of the apparition of his mother.

Ghostly Difference

Let me turn now to two of the most enigmatic occurrences of this return as it suspends, as I’ve suggested, the paranoid or catastrophic imaginary. While the innumerable allusions to curves, bends, turns, spirals, corners, etc., in Mayn’s haunted reveries of his “departed” mother all bring to appearance, as we saw, the tropological character of being’s essentially dissimulating structure, nowhere is this structure figured, in the visual sense of the term, in such an *unheimlich* manner as in the visions of Sarah’s nocturnal apparition as it will have occurred, James recalls, in his adolescence.

For Mayn’s traumatism is, in fact, double: the first “shock” being that of an awakening to sexual difference though the discovery – of which he grows conscious as he works back through the “jetsam” of his origin – of his mother’s adultery, probably responsible for the birth of his younger brother Brad; and the second, as we’ve seen, that of her “departure,” which itself, it is surmised, may be the result of an attempt to avoid a second illegitimate pregnancy.

Mayn’s projection of himself into the futuristic nightmare therefore has a double origin, and it is precisely the double character of this trauma which, ultimately, will have a curative effect: the mother’s ghost-like apparition after the first shock preparing the groundwork, as it were, for the son’s recovery from the second. One day on the beach at the age of thirteen Mayn receives the first shock which, thirty-some years later, he will know as being partly responsible not only for a certain “turning” away from his mother – in the attempt, precisely, to see the source of that shock – but for the paranoid “warping” of himself into his futuristic ordeal:

he knew [...] that at thirteen he had missed some point before when he turned away from her to see what the heck she was looking at so he warped her and himself into a real fix he would never get out of, oh it was his future he’d have to go to and look back from (394).

He is too late, of course, to see what his mother’s gaze reflects to him: her lover, Bob Yard, on the beach. But in memory Mayn returns repeatedly to the shock his awareness received at that instant, a shock which provokes, as we observe here, an avid desire to know its origin: whence the initial turn (“he turned away from her”), followed by the “warping” of that turn into the future which he will spend the rest of his life looking back from.

If Mayn is “divided into two,” as we read further on (and as I pointed out previously), by that shock and its immediate after-effects, it is not by the vision of any “primal scene” but instead by the act of his mother’s appearing to divert his attention, turning her gaze to sea; the way in which Mayn interprets this “dissimulation” will have important consequences:

if he had only been smart enough to see that it had been her *life* she had somehow lost and not a son whom she divided into two that they [her lover and her son] not meet (403).

This is one of many suggestions in the text that not the least important effect of Mayn's shock was to cause him to turn away – into the solipsistic outer-space vacuum of the ego³² – from the suffering of others, his mother's first if not foremost. But no evidence of a primal scene, rather the *appearance* of its veiling, of its dissimulation, is what divides Mayn, as he gathers thirty-some years later, "warping" him into the future and causing him to turn away from the "*life*" his mother is losing or has already "lost." The turning of his mother's face towards the sea where, indeed, it appears her life will be lost is the first "turn" in what will become a vertiginous series of turns – the basis of the aberrant and destabilizing temporality of the sexually catastrophic imaginary –, the acceleration of which proceeds from the son's desire to look back into what the first turn would be diverting him from seeing. The paranoid imaginary begins there, not simply in a *mis*interpreted act of dissimulation, but in the reductive interpretation of a turning towards death as a mere turning away from presence – call it symbolically the phallus – that the son wishes revealed.

This phallogocentric "warping" of an originary turning is what Mayn, we know, will have to work back from. What has not yet been interrogated directly however is the way in which by uncovering, not presence, but the topological conditions of being which the quest for presence conceals, it is the very structure of Western power relations, fundamentally paranoid in nature, that is dismantled, or, if I dare say, deconstructed. This deconstruction of course leaves nothing of the phallogocentric basis of these power relations intact. If sexual difference, as I pointed out earlier, is silenced in speech but returns in the writing of *Women and Men* (not *Men and Women*, as in conventional usage), this is because in working his way back to the shock of his mother's adultery – itself, of course, a turning away from paternal law – Mayn turns or rather returns his attention to the rhetoricity of that shock, to the topological character of being itself, and it is no accident of course that the source of this "revelation" is maternal. Indeed, the non-dialectical, disharmonious opposition that structures the text between empowering modes of cognition which efface difference, or finitude, on one hand, and the "will to *no* power" which recovers that difference, on the other, is itself determined, in Oedipal fashion, in terms of parental identification. Much as sexual difference is "covered" in the voicing of the maternal name (Mayne), but uncovered and expressed in its writing, technology, and the modern regime of representation which corresponds with it, covers an older comprehension of the "coupling" of *technè* and *phusis*, an older, less paranoid, understanding of the relation between technology and nature. The "root conflict" or the philosophical antithesis which informs and (de-)structures *Women and Men* is partly determined, in other words, by paternal identification and separation from the mother. But it is also determined, or rather problematized in a radical manner, as we've seen, by a *relation* to the (separation from the) mother, that is, by a paradoxical identification with the maternal origin of the self. I call this identification paradoxical because, as Freud claims at least, individuation occurs precisely as a separation from the mother and an identification with the *figure* of the father. Indeed, only the father, in this Oedipal logic, assumes the status of figure, the affective bond or attachment to the mother consisting, on the contrary, of a pre-figural (monstrous, Medusa-like) threat to identification and to the process of individuation.³³

³² To borrow an elegant formulation from Jonathan Lethem who writes, speaking of the Mailer/McElroy opposition in *Ancient History*: "One Brooklyn boy calling to another to reconsider his 'Manichean' [...] exaggerations in favour of a view more grounded in awareness of bodies in time, bodies in their places, in rooms and streets and in nature, and most of all as bodies in relation to others rather than existing in solipsistic outer-space vacuums of ego" (Lethem xi). See the two essays by Abrioux in the bibliography to further pursue the question raised here of the body in McElroy's work.

³³ For my understanding of a paradoxical maternal identification, I am indebted to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of Freud in "Le Peuple juif ne rêve pas" (1981). In his discussion of the "figural poetics" of *Plus*, Yves Abrioux also links the figural to the problematic of identification (2011 166-169).

That is why it is inevitable, perhaps, insofar as the mother's presence does not manifest itself in strictly acoustic terms (her voice and her violin, as we saw previously), that her figure return in a ghostly manner. A manner which suspends, in its very withdrawal from presence, the phallogocentric or paternal logic of identification.³⁴ That the nightmare, *our* nightmare of technological power and paranoia is itself suspended by this return is due to the fact that the paternal logic of identification and the regime of representation that underwrites it – that regime which, once again, subordinates appearance to presence, or the structure of dissimulation to the dialectical logic of absence and presence – is the condition of the “objectivity” of science, of the modern techno-scientific quest for a *Mathesis universalis* capable of “mapping” nature with no remainder.³⁵ Just as the reductive translation (and interpretation) of *mimēsis* as “imitation,” or as the mere re-presentation of given phenomena, involves a shift, as we saw earlier, from the cognitively “powerless” state of being “in between” to the cognitively “powerful” (but ruinous and disabling) status of a subject in a world of objects, a world of “whatness,” so the understanding of *technè* as technology involves a shift from a certain kind of “knowledge” to “power,” as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has suggested (2012 117):³⁶ a power of which the instrumentalization of language as self-expression is scarcely a mere example, given what we've seen about the “poetic” character of being-in-the-world, as Heidegger insisted.

What Mayn retrieves, then, working back into the “jetsam of a mystery far more intelligent than he” – nothing less, of course, than a “remainder” of the techno-scientific quest for transparency noted above – is indeed an “older” comprehension of the “coupling” of *technè* and *phusis*, one which modern technology and its will to power conceals. He works his way back into a “knowledge,” in Lacoue-Labarthe's sense of the term – which from a more general perspective doubtless underwrites the “un-reified” relations between women and men in McElroy's novel –, or into an awareness that I related to the pastoral tradition, however far that tradition may seem, wrongly perhaps, from the “knowledge” (*technè*) of the Greeks.

Here then is the first apparition of the enigmatic *figure* of Mayn's mother, which occurs before her “departure” but after the shock her son receives of her (transgressive) sexuality (let me add that, given the ghostly return of this figure turning on a staircase, and its importance for Mayn, I cannot help thinking that McElroy had Henry James, that Master of dissimulation, in mind when he named his character James); it begins with the presentation of the hyperbolic sense of temporal disjunction, quoted partially above, which is compared to, but also interrupted by, the apparition of James's mother:

The future [he] had sloped out onto *was* like us the slope, static but for the shadow it threw, which was *him*, back upon Now, the Present, which was really the past from the vantage of that future he had gone into like a shock of memory which gave off a desire to return to what was a void and had to be reinvented, namely this present: God! It wasn't him, this future position, it felt causeless, caused by an absence of cause, it came at him a sure home, not someone else's.

³⁴ That the history of metaphysics since Plato is determined phallogocentrically, as Derrida has shown, is also insisted on by Granel in his essay “Phedon, le matin,” where he writes, in a manner that may help clarify the link between the sexual, the proper and Western power at its origin that is in question here: “Plato's sexual reveals in fact not the sexual, but a certain **logic (of the) sexual**: that of the phallic obsession with property.” (1995 166, my translation).

³⁵ On *Mathesis universalis* as the Western techno-scientific drive to total transparency see Granel (2012 51-105).

³⁶ See Lacoue-Labarthe's terse and provocative reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where he writes: “The response to the vertigo of *technè* is technical agitation. [...] Therein, precisely, is the *lure* par excellence, namely the Western lure itself – that is, as long as the West [...] is understood as that which will have always shrunk from the dread of knowledge (another word to translate, in its full meaning, the Greek *technè*) by taking refuge in know-how [savoir-faire], and as that which will have always confused ability (the gift) with power.” (2012 117)

Like when he woke up one night, and it was the night he walked out on the landing to find Sarah his mother wending her way upstairs with a book – and come to think of it her grandmother’s large comb – in her hand, reading. And a flashlight made like a candle.

But when he woke at first he heard certainly his mother, her neutral though now unusually explaining voice [...] and something else [...] caught Jim but *he didn’t* catch, for what was it?, he only got out of bed. [...] Turning to look down the stairs, he saw his mother on the way up with a book and comb, reading – the big brown-and-black-and-golden-orange comb. But later on he thought it might have been her ghost, and he could allow the possibility of ghosts [...]. (407-08)

It goes without saying that the few remarks I can make here are too brief to be decisive. It appears evident, however, that causeless, or “caused by an absence of cause,” the proleptic leap into the future and the maternal apparition which suspends it emerge from the same unreachable anteriority of the “void” in being, as I pointed out previously. But the hyperbolic temporalisation of the void is stilled in the ghost-like apparition of the mother. Simply put: after the traumatic awakening to sexual identity, that is, to difference, which is the “absent” cause of the temporal reversals and delirium, Mayn’s mother appears as a figural presentation – or *visitation* – of difference itself, the calm neutrality of which has the effect of suspending the phallogocentric panic: the acoustic presence of the voice which precedes the spectral visitation itself, her “wending” up the stairs as her son is “turning” to look down them, not to mention the book in her hand, read by flashlight, all point to the material and tropological (or meta-tropological) figuring of the void discussed previously.

Of course, the essential ambiguity of the figure resides in the fact that, withdrawing as a presence in its very presentation, abyssal in its ghostliness,³⁷ it calms the son’s exposure to difference, to finitude. That is why, having appeared in life as a ghost, Mayn hopes she will re-appear after her “departure,” that is, after the second shock or traumatism:

So later, after she had gone down the drain of the sea you might say cruelly, he looked forward to seeing her ghost again, because this other night when she was alive and Jim could have sworn had been heard just outside in the hall [...] she had evidently been a ghost out of the future. Of course as well as what she was. (409)

In short, the sexual trauma, followed by the ghostly apparition which suspends certain nightmarish effects of it, sets the stage, as I suggested previously, for its return after the second trauma, that of his mother’s having “gone down the drain of the sea,” as Mayn puts it, as always haunted by the tropological imagery that is almost invariably associated with her loss. I shall not discuss here the reasons why Mayn should have to wait thirty-some years for his haunted daydreams to have the effects I discussed above, nor the fundamental question, from a psychoanalytical perspective, of the “lateness” of his recovery. As Mayn himself observes: “What happens is never what comes first” (994). I shall simply point out in phenomenological terms that since the “object” has always already appeared in its “whatness,” and *how* it appeared isn’t anywhere in the appeared, the “untouchable processes beneath appearance,” as McElroy, once again, puts it, can only be thought outside the object itself, not in what “comes first” but afterwards. This is a logic of which Mayn’s mother herself seems aware in her frequent allusions to Einstein’s theory of *curved* space – an important homology or trope in the text –, which leaves Euclid’s notion of linear space phenomenally intact even while completely invalidating it. In the

³⁷ It is this withdrawal from presence which determines, of course, the opening of the “subject” to a plural identity – “Multiplied now into a life he [Mayn] could not explain to Joy.” (1052) – that Harry Mathews is right to insist on. Let me also note here, being unable to develop this point further, that the kind of paradoxical identification with the retreat of identification that we observe in Mayn’s relation to his mother should lead, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest, to a rethinking of the unconscious beyond the psychological; perhaps the “colloidal unconscious” developed in *Women and Men*.

same way, an awareness of “what happens,” that is, an awareness of the tropological and productive functions of language – “*It is thinking him!*” exclaims Mayn (994), echoing the narrative voice’s much earlier “We are spoken” (56) – undermines its grammatical and cognitive functions even as it leaves empirical consciousness of phenomenal reference intact. Lateness is a consequence of the disjunction between our everyday conception of language as descriptive or constative and the more originary, tropological and performative structure of language.³⁸

Here is the second visitation, or, as Mayn puts it, the second “reinvention” of his mother’s apparition. The figure possesses the same calm serenity, as though hovering between life and death, or beyond such oppositions, and with the same “protective” gaze as she turns away from the book she is reading, which is *not* Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw,” of which this scenario might be considered a sort of an anti-hysterical revision, but a novel by Hawthorne. More explicitly than in the previous version of the day-dream, the visitation occurs as the suspension or caesura of the terrifying synthesizing power of the techno-scientific future:

Yet no power from the next century’s L5 libration settlements to imagine into life the mid-twentieth century (hardly the first to see itself the last) can deny to Jim [...] a lost dream such as Jim’s one rainy night when he woke and exited from his bed sweating to open his door and saw his mother in her nightgown of course heading downstairs so slowly she seemed sleepwalking until she turned to look back up at him, her hair across one side of her face and he saw she was “readwalking” – a book in her hand, no common word of “It’s late” in her eyes that seemed protective for a change but he didn’t know of what – and he asked her what it was, and didn’t mean to though the act produced an effect, which was that as she told him he forgot his lost nightmare: “*The Marble Faun*,” she said, “and I’ve almost put my eyes out staying up reading – and what have *you* been up to, my darling?”

He didn’t know, and could only say, “What are you doing?” to which she softly replied as if her heart were in it, turning away and proceeding downstairs, “Just reading.” But he remembered going back to bed and later starting up awake convinced he was plunged into a future where people had been at once combined and sent away to settle another world. (666-67)

Two remarks to conclude. Firstly, the “protective” gaze of this figure of a serene and melancholic dignity, dissimulating in its essence, but beyond all power of simulation, is the *in*-condition, for beyond being itself, of the pastoral ethos I’ve attempted to define with respect to McElroy’s writing. In one of Henry James’s most enigmatic works, a short story entitled (in its initial publication) “The Way it Came,” a similar apparition comes as an admonitory figure, warning against the specular and dialectical appropriation of difference (and thereby preserving the possibility of a different form of relation). One of Maurice Blanchot’s narrators, who, like McElroy perhaps, also finds himself confronted with a repetition or a revision of an apparition from James – a “sovereign apparition,” he writes, whose “return” suspends the narrative and exposes its narrator to the outside, to pure difference – qualifies it as “apocalyptic,” while insisting, however, on the *turning* and on the dissimulating appearance of the figure, feminine in this case too: “a little turned aside, the body half-bent, the head inclined towards the knees,” “slightly distanced from herself amidst her presence,” etc. (Blanchot 134-166, my translation), which saves or protects.

These are figures of Revelation, as the book in Mayn’s mother’s hand suggests, but of a literary and secular nature, grounded in the vernacular language of speech. What they reveal, in their abyssal manner, is nothing less than the enigma of appearance itself, the “mystery” of an irreducibly figural dimension of being. Its rhetorical or tropological “in-condition,” if this term

³⁸ One supposes from the title of the novel McElroy has been working on apparently for a number of years, *Voir Dire* (McElroy, 2001 15), meaning, literally, seeing saying, that it will also explore these performative and tropological conditions of appearance.

can suffice to describe a condition that slips away in its very conditionality. What the pastoral ethos in McElroy's work comes down to, in the end, is a stance of respect towards appearance, towards the figurality of the world or of reality, as the fundamental condition for saving it.

This includes – and this is my second remark, merely a reemphasis of the first – the appearance of ghosts,³⁹ that is, the apprehension (no perception, we saw in the first extract, can quite “catch” it) of an *unheimlich* figuring of the gap in being which discloses finitude and conceals it at the same time. Gives it *in* withholding it. Beyond any “natural” or “biological” maternity, since it is the figure of a mother we have been dealing with,⁴⁰ the revelation of this giving (and the giving of this revelation) is the enigma at the source of all “human” relations, as McElroy, in his book, has given us in his turn to read: “we, who are relations meteorolong, whorled, humanward” (657).

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³⁹ The question arises as to whether Gerard Granel, to whom I am indebted in this paper, would accept the “thesis” (it cannot be one, of course) of a ghostly condition of appearance (as Derrida, I am convinced, would); the very strength of Granel's discourse in its philosophical commitment to the logical uncovering of the conditions of being seems to forbid, in a certain manner, such a “literary” in-condition of the philosophical, despite his radical attention to language (the logical as adjective of Logos) and his affirmation of the “mute philosophy” of Art. McElroy's mute philosophy, that is to say his no less committed drive to retrieve from the world the conditions of its appearance, is perhaps itself exceeded at the core of his work where the enigma of appearance appears.

⁴⁰ And not mothers, unfortunately, as a lengthier reading could have allowed and which in truth is necessitated by the no less important relation between James Mayn and his grandmother Margaret, whose pastoral sensibility I merely alluded to earlier.

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