

# Sensation in Joseph McElroy's *Plus*



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*[C]omme des forces affrontées dans le cosmos  
par un voyageur trans-spatial immobile dans  
sa capsule.*

—Gilles Deleuze

Joseph McElroy's *Plus* is a fictional variation on the theme of the disembodied brain in a vat. Its protagonist is the brain of a terminally ill man which has been removed from his body and transferred into a spaceship in static orbit over the earth, in the interest of scientific experimentation. Its functions and their response to the effects of solar energy are therefore being monitored and relayed back to earth. In the course of the novel, the brain does more than come to consciousness. Affirming and developing this consciousness from micro-perceptions on the scale of multi-cellular firings which provoke an unprecedented epigenetic process, it comes into conflict with its human monitors. Generically situated in the domain of science fiction, *Plus* has characteristically been assessed in terms of its perceived references either to information theory and/or to the biology of epigenesis, cognition and consciousness. Let me take the most recent examples that come to hand of these contextualizing moves.

Reading *Plus* along with Richard Powers's *Galatea.2.2* as a fictional example of a non-human intelligence becoming conscious, Mark Bould and SherryL Vint (2007, p. 92-98) argue that its account of the

brain's development can be understood in terms of Gerald Edelman's explanation of the parts played by the limbic and thalamocortical systems in brain function and, furthermore, that it is in accord with Daniel Dennett's account of distributed consciousness and the role of memory in the construction of a sense of selfhood. However, Bould and Vint's interest is not so much in the accuracy or otherwise of *Plus's* relation to these theories, which were chiefly popularized by Dennett and Edelman after the publication of the novel; it is in the critical effect produced by McElroy's narrative on the model of monadic bourgeois consciousness, with which biographical and autobiographical texts have frequently been considered to comply. They conclude that "The model of consciousness envisioned in *Plus* points to ways that autobiography might move beyond the isolated individualist subjectivity and toward a more fragmented experience of self". In this approach to science fiction, a fiction's scientific inspiration and references may enable a renewal of (auto)biographical writing: "science fiction stories of artificial and other intelligences offer new models with which to reflect upon identity, experience, and narration" (p. 86).

Katherine Hayles and James Pulizzi reference Bould and Vint's use of Edelman in their account of *Plus*. However, their interest is less in cognition in relation to contemporary biology, than in a discussion of meaning-making in the wake of cybernetics. For Hayles and Pulizzi, McElroy's novel provides an occasion to demonstrate the centrality of context in the process whereby information—technically defined as a probability function devoid of meaning—is transformed into something that makes sense in human terms (2010, p. 143-146). They explain that *Plus's* narrator "speaks a language only partially of the human world" In the first place, the posthuman brain's estrangement from the world of "love, choices and death" means that it uses ordinary words or phrases whose denotations it avowedly cannot remember. Conversely, it invents words with denotations at which McElroy's readers "can only guess". One might add that it also deploys existing biological terms which may at best be vaguely familiar to the uninitiated.

Hayles and Pulizzi point out that, on the one hand, the reader's familiar human context has become unfamiliar to the novel's protagonist, whose viewpoint the text adheres to throughout. On the other, *Plus's* extended disquisitions on brain (rather than mind) states

address a domain of experience which is comparably inaccessible to readers. They consider the novel to be caught in the tension between these two contextual poles. As rendered in *Plus*'s enthralling play with indirect discourse (cf. Brooke-Rose, 1981), the narrative of the protagonist's emerging consciousness as what it describes as a "lattice" constitutes what Hayles and Pulizzi describe as "an experiment in how subjectivity would change if its cognitive networks [connecting inside and outside] were utterly changed". The result is a "posthuman *Bildungsroman*" which challenges the reader's powers of apprehension, insofar as its context lies "outside normal human communication". However, the novel's plot also brings the brain into confrontation with its human monitors. It finishes by suggesting that the brain chooses death on reentry into the atmosphere, in putative defense of its posthuman agency, desire and self-knowledge against the will of its handlers. While this conclusion underlines the extent to which the novel's two contexts remain incompatible, Hayles and Pulizzi observe that it also suggests that "the only way in which the [cybernetic] noise of the lattice's message can be brought into human being is as a question, a wondering, and thereby an implicit urge to circumscribe the noise of an alien context within the limits of human symbolic systems".

Hayles and Pulizzi's approach to *Plus* as science fiction parallels that of Bould and Vint. Both sets of authors consider that exposing narrative to the pressures of contemporary science not only sharpens (post)humanistic issues but indeed offers the humanities avenues for their own theoretical development. All this is admirably commonsensical. Reading *Plus* in terms of the culturally dominant "great narratives" of cybernetics, biology or cognitive science, these two recent essays not only ably update a series of studies devoted to McElroy's novel since it first appeared in 1976 (see also Leclair, 1989, p. 145 on systems, White Hadas, 1990, on brain research, Proietti, 2004, on cyborgs); they also convincingly instantiate a mainstream approach in science-and-literature studies, as these have developed in the last twenty years or so. Does the way they read *Plus* thereby act as a corrective to the novelist's assertion, made in a short essay a decade and a half after its publication, that his fictions—explicitly including this novel—are not "“about science”" (McElroy, 1992, scare quotes in the original)? Or do science-and-literature interpretations such as

those I have cited not rather fall into the category of the metaphorical readings of *Plus* which McElroy gratefully acknowledges in the same essay, before going on to declare that he himself views the book as *non*-metaphorical (emphasis in the original)? In order to explore the implications of this statement, which suggests a different approach to the novel, I shall turn to Gilles Deleuze.

Deleuze famously dismissed metaphor. In his account of Francis Bacon, he insists that the distortions which people the artist's paintings establish "matters of fact" (1981, p. 10; the expression features in English in the original French text), as opposed to "intelligible relations" of whatever species between objects or ideas. When Deleuze further suggests that the painted heads in Bacon's portraits and self-portraits are subjected to forces like those faced "in the cosmos by a space-traveler immobilized in his capsule" (p. 40), the analogy is clearly derived from science fiction rather than contemporary technology: even before the early 1980s when this statement was made, live television had familiarized viewers with images of astronauts cavorting around large-size spacecraft, rather than permanently strapped into tiny vehicles. This suggestion offers only the most superficial resemblance with the hermeneutical readings of *Plus* which McElroy describes as metaphorical. Deleuze implicitly sketches two experimental situations, with that of the fictional traveler in a primitive space vehicle being deployed to draw out the situation of a model (sometimes the painter's own reflection) in the artist's studio. The traveler resembles the model in one particular only: the shared immobility which exposes both to "invisible forces" by which they are not so much animated (i.e. spurred into action) as merely agitated.

For Deleuze, Bacon's series of painted heads testify to a peculiar species of motility, which he opposes both to movement as ordinarily understood as taking place in and through space and to transformation in time. He thus argues that—in contrast (say) to the sequences of rapid-fire photographs of horses or bison produced by Muybridge (from whose photographs Bacon did indeed also paint)—"the extraordinary agitation of these heads does not come from a movement which the series might be supposed to reassemble but much rather from the forces of pressure, dilation, contraction, flattening, stretching, which act on the immobile head" (1980, p. 40). Nor do the paintings

testify to a set of formal transformations undergone by the heads. Deformation registers force, rather than showing movement or change. In its immobility, the model's head is exposed to the "invisible forces" implicit in the artist's painterly style.

Just as Bacon's painted heads coexist as series of deformations, rather than sequences of actions or changes, so does *Plus* function by repetition and variation, as much as—and perhaps more than—by linear progression. After repeating and modulating the terms of its first, short paragraph—"He found it all around. It opened and was close. He felt it was himself, but felt it was more" (p. 3)—the novel's opening chapter thus concludes: "There was more all around" (p. 12). "More where?" asks the second chapter (p. 13), whose final words, eight pages later, will be: "And the more that was all around was getting closer and closer to Imp Plus" (p. 21). Each of the novel's first 5 chapters has a comparable conclusion. As Joan Richardson has observed, the novel "generates by replication" (1990, p. 158).

Deleuze's introduction of science fiction into his discussion of Francis Bacon specifies the invisible forces of painting as being in some sense cosmic. This characteristic Deleuzian gesture identifies them as being non-human, non-organic non-mechanical, etc. That is, the forces which interest Deleuze lie outwith the scope of reference of our ordinarily perceived world. They constitute the "plane of immanence" which his philosophy engages and from which his concepts emerge. In the domain of art, this engagement takes place by way of sensation as a mode of being-in-the-world. A painter such as Cézanne "*becomes* in sensation" while, simultaneously, something *arrives* [happens; comes about] through sensation" (1981, p. 27). Art preserves sensation, so that a work of art is "a block of sensations, which is to say, a compound of percepts and affects" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991, p. 154). The deformation, suction, stretching and dilation displayed by Bacon's painted heads and bodies constitute such blocks of sensation. Escaping from their recognizable workaday functional structuring, these heads and bodies enter a different but equally factual condition: "actual, real, physical states, sensations and in no way imaginative constructs" (Deleuze, 1981, p. 18).

I have argued elsewhere that McElroy's fiction is characteristically deployed on a scale at which actions capable of being unproblematically

integrated into familiar patterns of human behavior—the tack followed by what the novelist once described as the “regular sensitive American novel”, which he found himself incapable of composing (McElroy, 1975, p. 202)—give way to conjunctions of detached or even dysfunctional organs, limbs and objects (Abrioux, 2001, p. 45). Both the texture of McElroy’s prose and the logic of his narratives thus require that careful attention be paid to apparently disparate details. Readers will find themselves concentrating on words, sentences and paragraphs; or again on individual statements, short sequences, fragments of plot. In each case, the momentum towards a more encompassing level is, if not precisely stalled, then at least complexified and rendered non-linear.

As Joseph Tabbi has stated with reference to *Lookout Cartridge*, that novel’s chief protagonist finds himself in a situation where his experience is “so decentered and relational” that “no one bit of information ever seems to be excluded or excludable”—a condition only accentuated by the assumption that at some point all will cohere (1995, p. 135). *Lookout Cartridge* plays with the narrative surprises inherent in the conventions of a tale of international espionage, as does *Hind’s Kidnap* with those of the amateur detective story. In these large-scale fictions, McElroy radically heightens the readerly tensions propagated by the mysteries of plot lines. The extent to which thrillers have gained the upper hand over romance suggests that the focus on enigma and the hunt for solutions is the major generic trait of today’s popular fiction. This situation is highly symptomatic of what the readerly impulse continues to expect of the novel in general. Roland Barthes’s name for the literary device which conventionally toys with the pleasures implicit in this demand by delaying solutions to enigmas even as they are formulated, is the hermeneutic code (1970, p. 24). McElroy pushes its workings to the limit, thereby forcing a change in the dynamics of the reader’s engagement with plot, as this is twisted into the direction of the seriality, as opposed to sequentiality.

That *Plus* further intensifies this process is due to the immobility of its protagonist and his downscaling to a body part deprived of any connection to the organic extensions or prostheses which would allow it to take the initiative in performing a purposeful action: “Most of [his body] was gone. And so could not react” (p. 41). This is what allows the emergence of sensation as being-in-the-world. An

early reference to organic sight treats the eye in its socket almost as a prosthetic limb, perception as purposeful action: “Imp Plus knew he had no eyes. [...] Imp Plus had no sockets and knew it. No sockets to hold or to lose light. No sockets to man.” (p. 3). However, organ loss does not destroy sensation: “Yet Imp Plus saw” (p. 3). Rather, organ-less sight constitutes a de-centered mode of contact: “the membranes were what he saw with. Though not eyes” (p. 76). As organ-limbs are replaced by differentiations in the membrane, or “limb membrane[s]” (p. 79), light becomes sensation—“a feeling of light” (p. 92)—and the brain enters into resonance with the unmediated force to which it is exposed: “But there was a brightness and it folded. Or Imp Plus folded it” (p. 4).

A memory of human eye-contact condenses the process whereby, as the acting or reacting body becomes the body of sensation, hold becomes flow:

Imp Plus found in all the folds whose fibers gripped each lens of those eyes he had held with his own lost eyes a sweet humor of sugar and blood which unfolding flowed over him.

It was a fluid ground laid down upon furrows, fissures, ridges, rolls.

It flowed over Imp Plus’s body now, except that he had no body. Flowed into folds that were his (p. 40–41).

A detailed reading of *Plus* would, amongst other things, show how the novel regularly deploys synesthesia—as implicitly it does here—to insist on both perception and cellular biology as sensation: “seabirds had touched his eyes, though he had no eyes” (p. 17), “the voice had touched Imp Plus” (p. 20), “a green of its own breathing, its own breath” (p. 28), “A block of light blasted him. It gulped around him closing him. It made him a new nerve past breathing” (p. 47), etc. It would also show how sensation as resonance stimulates involuntary memory (as opposed to re-*membering*: “He knew *memory*, but saw that it was not the same as *remember*”, p. 74; emphasis in the original) as an intensive state, across the disjunction between the human and the cellular scale:

Against the gradient grid of the impulses drawing Imp Plus in [...] with requests for enzyme action in chlorella, there was laughter.

Yet Laughter then, not now; vibration bent out of its sources. (p. 9)

It would further explore the epigenesis of this intensive body and its struggles to preserve the specificity of sensation against patterns of “regular[ly] sensitive” behavior, etc. One instance of this struggle will suffice here.

The novel’s first chapter establishes an opposition to which it will return throughout. The space traveler is functionally linked both to solar energy and to earthbound monitoring capacities. It is apparent to the brain from the outset that this monitoring does not formally require its cooperation: “there was no need [...] to think of the messages coming from Earth on the frequency. No need to think about the other pulses going to Earth from Imp Plus” (p. 3). Imp Plus rapidly counters the parasitical monitoring function by silencing the “Dim Echo” which provides the required readings and is later dismissed as “An echo that went on communicating knowns by knowns” (p.40). More significantly, it evolves an alternate, processual monitor: “planes of tree-branch folia, planes like flattened leaves, [...] folds so many, so packed, so fine their slowed cycles and endless-fingered special bodies were ready to be reached by many motions at once and be the monitor or balance or union of these things” (p. 87).

McElroy’s prose provides precisely this balance, or rhythm, which displaces the transfer of data, for which his novel suggests that no language, in the strong sense, is required. The text tells us that the “words” Imp Plus needed were not the message pulses coming on the frequency from Earth asking for glucose readings (p. 4). This is not to say that sensation is beyond language. “Words known before came back but not from Ground” (p. 18). What may make known words come back, not from functional ground, but as sensation, is style. In *Plus*, this involves the conjunction of at least two processes.

The first can readily be discerned as figural. Its chief symptoms are perhaps lexical. The opening paragraph of the novel is prosaic enough. It begins by evoking an enveloping matter of fact—“He found it all

around”—followed by dynamical and situational features—“It opened and was close”—and raises the issue of identification: “He felt it was himself, but felt it was more”. If it is not clear that the repeated verb “felt” has a single valence, as more properly percept or affect, that is because sensation challenges selfhood.

Paragraph two begins by coining an association of verb and particle: “It nipped open from outside in and from inside out”. I have not found the turn of phrase “to nip open” (as opposed, say, to nip “off”) attested in dictionaries. However, its aptness will be sensed in an age in which fluids are routinely to be obtained in sealed packaging, or indeed by anyone who has ever “nipped open” a pod to release its seeds. Here the usage is intransitive and bidirectional, suggesting a dynamic of selective reciprocal contraction and expansion. Although the paragraph concludes by affirming the situation as unchanged—“Imp Plus found it all around”, sensation has already begun to twist ordinary language..

Paragraph three also opens with a coined verbal phrase: “Imp Plus caved out”. Interestingly, this does not initially have any of the negative connotations of collapse carried by the familiar “cave *in*” (although these persist in what a word search tells me urban sexual slang calls a “cave out”). Furthermore, while reiterating the expansion conveyed by “nipped open”, “caved out” elides causality. Indeed, avoiding any notion of purposeful or organized behavior, it reads as an improbable, organ-less sensation-event. As such, it sets the tone for the growth of organ- and limb-like excrescences in subsequent chapters of the novel. These, McElroy’s coinage suggests, may be understood as implying body as pure sensation—better: as a compound of percept and affect whose unheralded quality testifies to invisible forces, rather than as the development of alternative material attributes of embodiment. Thus does *Plus* define the plane of sensation towards which the conjunctions of organs, limbs and objects which people McElroy’s narratives already incline. If this plane can only remain invisible to a “regular” sensitivity, it is because it has to be invented—as indeed it is, in a very few lines of dense prose, culminating in “Imp Plus caved out”.

It is important to grasp the status of such formulations. Even if it is necessary to read slowly in order to tease out the lexical complexities of McElroy’s prose and the implications of its focus on sensation, the terms in which *Plus* formulates its “biology” are not as foreign as Hayles

and Pulizzi suggest when they phrase the disjunction between the human and the posthuman in terms of a radical difference in context. It will be recalled that they argue that this disjunction explains why the detached brain in orbit finds itself using words with “denotations” it cannot remember, when it invokes human memories, and invents words with denotations at which the novel’s readers “can only guess”, when it describes its current biological state. This is, however, to conflate the distinct linguistic functions of denotation and reference. The familiar example of “evening star”, “morning star” and “Venus” shows that words or expressions can have distinct denotations while sharing the same referent. The fact that, in the case under consideration, this is not even a star, not to mention a classical goddess, but a planet, does not suffice to render any of these designations mistaken or improper, not to mention incomprehensible. What it shows is that meaning cannot be collapsed into reference and that semantics is not a straightforward correlation of statement and context, conducted for the communication of data.

My son was eight years old when he first picked up and voraciously read *Treasure Island*. Not only did he have no problem explaining that the strange word which a suspicious parent pointed to in the text evoked what he described as a “bit of a boat”—and that many other words did so too. More importantly, he understood that he did not need to enquire any further in order to make sense of Stevenson’s fiction and of the part sea-going vessels played in it. Similarly, it is certain that most readers of *Plus* will readily supply plausible denotations for “shearow” or “faldoream” (p. 188), not to mention other abstruse, if attested, elements of nomenclature which the book also uses. Conversely, while a posthuman brain may indeed “remember words that [it] did not know” (p. 4), in the sense of not being able to provide them with incontrovertible referents either in its estranged former existence or in its current biological one, the drift of *Plus*’s prose shows that it is equally capable of attributing plausible denotations to them and indeed of working—and playing—with these. Joan Richardson, perhaps the first commentator to pay close attention to the language of *Plus*, observes that “On first reading it is impossible to follow and understand everything that is being presented. There are gaps in comprehension. In these spaces—ellipses—we are forced to think, imagine; we strain to

see. We experience thought becoming an activity” (1990, p. 162). More precisely perhaps, we experience thought becoming sensation; better still, sensation becoming thought.

With or without lexical coinages, the figural poetics of McElroy’s novel affect its syntax. In order to draw out this second point, I shall begin with an apparently non-literary example – the first few lines of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). The English translation of 1977 is quoted by Jean-Jacques Lecerle in his study *Deleuze and Language*. It reads: “It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said *the id*”. Lecerle analyzes this and the rest of the paragraph at some length (2002, p. 8-11).

Commenting on the repetition of “it”, he observes that “the original word, in French, is the deictic *ça* (*ça fonctionne partout*)” and insists that a deictic is not a personal pronoun. Neither, he adds, is the third-person neuter “it”. Just like “*ça*”, “it” may be used in cases of zero-topicalization, where no already-known information is presupposed, as in “*It is raining*”. Deleuze and Guattari’s inaugural “It is at work everywhere” may be read in this way. However, “it” may equally function as a cataphor, announcing a focus on what follows, as in “*It is true that...*” Read like this, “It is at work everywhere” begins a process of identification, which the text pursues by the addition of further defining features, both within the same sentence and in those that follow. There ensues a modification in the function of “it” in “It breathes, it heats” and in “It shits and fucks”. It now acts as an anaphor referring back to a topic that has already been broached (just as the “it” in this sentence refers back to “it” as a grammatical unit, as analyzed by Lecerle). Finally, amongst other features which distinguish “*ça*” from “it” is the fact that “*le ça*” is the French translation of Freud’s “*das Id*”, which gives rise to a play on words that is lost in translation, since English sticks to the German term: “It [*Ça*] is at work everywhere [...] What a mistake to have ever said *the id* [le *ça*]”. Deleuze and Guattari’s “*ça*” turns out to be desire, which the syntactical/referential play of their opening paragraph prevents from coalescing into a substantival entity.

The notion of sensation deployed in Deleuze’s study of Bacon relates in a fairly complex manner to the “*ça*”/“it” of the logic of desire which he developed in collaboration with Guattari. However, it is not

necessary to delve further into this issue, in order to understand the relevance of Lecercle's analysis of the creative slippages in the opening lines of *Anti-Oedipus* to the discursive strategy pursued in the first few paragraphs of *Plus*. Let me give a fuller, uninterrupted quotation:

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

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

Imp Plus caved out. There was a lifting all around, and Imp Plus knew there was no skull. This lifting was good. But there had been another lifting and he had wanted it, but then that lifting had not been good. (p. 3)

Not only does the repetitive structure of the prose cause the successive "it"s to modulate all but undecidably between zero topicalization, cataphor and anaphor. The same is true of the "he"s, even if this pronoun is marked as masculine and thus inevitably implies topicalization (here elided)—thereby motivating the observation that "this was not the start". This first "this" is an anaphor. However, like "he", it does not exclude a cataphoric function, whereas the following "this", in "this lifting", is forcefully anaphoric. By forming a contrasting pair with the equally anaphoric "that lifting," it furthermore seals the emergence of the topic of memory which, paradoxically, feels as if it was initially provoked by the absence of aspect in the first fifteen verbs of the novel. The "was" of "There was a lifting" is especially significant here. Just as "there" is a clear instance of zero-topicalization, the simple past of "was" involves zero-aspect; and just as "there" stands opposed to the anaphoric and cataphoric dimensions of "it", "he" and "this", so does "was" silently invite the perfect which immediately follows in "But there had been".

To summarize. Neither "it" nor "he" initially has a precisely identifiable referent. Both are supple in the way they channel topicalization (albeit less markedly in the case of "he"), while "this" leans towards a more exclusively anaphoric function. It thereby reifies the sensation-event whose pure occurrence "there was" registers.

Modulations of diexis and verbal aspect thus simultaneously enable the emergence of sensation as a matter of non-referential fact and redeploy it within coordinates which give it an object-like status through reference.

Lecerclé insists that vagueness “far from being a defect of reference in natural languages, is an asset” (2002, p. 10). The opening paragraphs of *Plus* are anything but vague, in the ordinary sense of the word. For “vagueness” read therefore the indeterminacy of extra-textual reference, upon which McElroy’s prose style builds a complex system of intra-textual reference. The figural dynamics which ensues maintains the novel on a cusp between the non-organic plane of percept and affect and the “regular sensitive” human world of both subjective experience and “objective” technoscience. As a consequence, *Plus* is propelled into a series of variations which the sequential logic of plot barely succeeds in containing. The treatment of discourse in terms derived from information-technology, whether in cybernetics or contemporary biology, can only pass by the poetics of sensation which makes McElroy’s novel boldly experimental.

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