

## ANALYSIS

*Plus* (1977)



Joseph McElroy

(1930- )

“*Plus* (1977), McElroy’s fifth novel, was a spin-off from *Lookout Cartridge*: the ultimate in insertion and discovery now reflected in *Plus*, a disembodied brain, orbiting the earth in a capsule called *Imp*. The aim here is to test out structures, distances, movement, in their pure states. The prose is itself an attempt at a new voice. ‘And the windings in the solid of their spiral up and down yet as well under the full reach of multi-sight that *Imp Plus* relented into, gathered radiance of motion into a fixity like his own orbit: or, beyond his orbit, a possibility he wanted not to think of.’ Isolated passages such as this create the sense of a disembodied brain, and accommodating the physically bizarre. But an entire novel filled with such passages is difficult to assimilate even in small doses; parts displace the whole.

McElroy has written articles on *Apollo 17* and *Skylab*, showing interest in man-made machine systems which carry over into *Plus*. We perceive he is attempting to go beyond Barth and Pynchon into interfacial areas which border man and machine. Interfaces are imaginary locations where information and power are exchanged, by way of a man-machine system which feeds in information. The problem is a hardware one, of fitting two systems together, human and mechanical. Barth had reached for such a system in *Giles*, Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In this respect, *Plus* is our novel of the seventies: an orbiting disembodied brain so connected to its mechanical systems that it functions as system; until, inevitably, its brain function begins to work, as if against the systems. And once that occurs, the brain begins to put together sensations, memories, extensions of itself in a real world.

In a way, the brain is an embryo which gains consciousness slowly, in fact, McElroy has structured his floating or orbiting brain as embryonic matter, but with memory, past consciousness, and sensations, a kind of Wordsworthian preexistence. In ‘Holding with *Apollo 17*,’ he speaks of writing about technology and people ‘in accord with some virtue of vision to be found in technology.’ Space systems somehow have to be incorporated into our view of human life; there cannot be the novelist’s bias against that machine world, that dismissal which McElroy suggests is a rejection of human qualities as well.

This fascination with machines as extensions and embodiments of man can be discovered in shapes, and here we enter the world of *Plus*. *Plus* orbiting in *Imp* is nothing if not shape, a blob here, then extension of that in memory and in feelers, until we have something human which is also mechanical: the two meeting in some transfigured orbit. McElroy's motto: 'The real action is in the movement that inheres in relations.' Otherwise, everything is 'invisible cities'."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row, 1983) 383

"One way of recounting the story of Joseph McElroy's *Plus* (1977) is as follows. An engineer who has been exposed to radiation is told that he is dying and is persuaded to play the role of guinea-pig in an advanced cybernetics experiment. Though he is married and has a small child he agrees. Two men who work for the experimental laboratory tell him his brain will be excised from his sick body. In exchange for this sacrifice, he will achieve a sort of heroism. After all, the harsher-seeming of these two men tells him, you can't expect to go on forever in your present condition. They explain that his brain will be hooked up to various pools of nutrients, beds of vegetation, and electrical equipment including computers, gauges, and communications devices. He will be put into a capsule and launched into orbit around the earth.

Eventually, at the termination of the experiment, his orbit, partially controlled by his own brain, will decay into the atmosphere of the earth. If he is lucky—and the intentions or expectations of the program regarding this are ambiguous at best—he will be recovered. He is given a little time off a week before the final experiment for a gathering of forces. He goes to the Pacific beach of Mexico where he meets a woman and has an affair with her. He watches the birds play by the surf in the sun. He falls ill and is nursed back to health, his recovery relying upon an injection. He discovers, as a result of the suspicious coincidence of the right medicine being so readily available, that he has been watched all this time by the experimenters. In contemplating his fate he remembers once speaking to a blind news vendor whose filthy bandages wrapped shabbily around his head revealed, more than concealed, the red gashes that were once his eyes. The news vendor said to him, 'I could have been a vegetable. But I took hold of myself. I can see more than you think I can.' As if to prove it, the news vendor mentioned a little girl standing quietly nearby.

When the time comes, his brain is surgically removed from his body and placed into a glucose bath, attached to a computer, and launched into orbit. Either the shock or the intended effect of the transformation has somehow dehumanized him, eliminating even the most primitive sense of himself as something more than a communications device. However, something strange and apparently accidental happens—irradiation from the sun, perhaps—that awakens him into a new level of awareness. Formerly performing just a series of routine and mechanical operations, readings, adjustments, and calculations for Cap Com, he suddenly begins to have an awareness of himself as something apart from the machines he is connected to. He begins to alter physically in a painful but definite growth. Although upon launch he has no organs for such sight, he now seems to be able to see shadows. Formerly noting but a mass of brain cells controlled by his mechanically hitched hypothalamus and feedback devices, *Imp Plus* (that is what he calls himself) begins to differentiate his cells at will. His neurons first de-differentiate back in structural cells and then, pulped by intracellular mitochondrial energy factories, which are in turn fed by the glucose baths, he re-differentiates his cells into a new and weird set of organs.

He grows four stalks connected to the optic chiasma, and soon realizes he has microscopic vision and some mysterious 'ultra vision' in addition to normal sight. With his new-found powers, he watches the highly technical and chemical processes as they occur in his own body-brain, even at the atomic level, thus becoming a sort of bio-physics laboratory-and-observer all in one. *Imp Plus* slowly learns that he is engaged in a positive feedback loop with himself: the more he learns and the more he recovers his memories through the differentiation of various images and sensations, the more conscious he becomes. Similarly, the more differentiated his body grows, the more new organs he grows in turn. Finally, he learns that there is even a positive feedback loop between his own physical growth, guiding his own development in ever widening spirals of complexity, activity and power.

*Imp Plus* soon rebels against the merely mechanical portion of himself, the one assigned the cybernetic task of governing the devices of his orbiting capsule. He calls this abandoned part of himself, the robot

brain, 'Dim Echo.' Soon, he severs communication with a bewildered Cap Com in order to monitor his painful but weirdly beautiful growth undistracted; more human motives, too, creep into his experience. He resents the technicians who have used him in this fashion and resents his cruel fate. But he also marvels at his own growth. After all, he has grown a body from a mind, reversing the normal route of evolutionary phylogeny and foetal ontogeny. What is more, his self-consciousness, that uniquely human trait, has arisen from what was originally a determined, controlled, clockwork cybernetic device, a pre-programmed organic computer than could calculate but could not think (or as John Barth remarks in *Giles Goat-Boy*, play chess but not poker.') One could say that Imp Plus's ontogeny recapitulates his ontology.

Now, however, Imp Plus has decisions to face: he is stuck inside his capsule and must take his fate into his own hands. Should he co-operate with Cap Com and try to be rescued or try to bounce off the meniscus of the earth's atmosphere and carom off into deep space? Should he drive into the sun or allow his capsule to burn up, meteor-like, upon re-entry into the earth's atmosphere? To help him decide, he establishes telepathic links with members of Cap Com but discovers there only the fear and suspicion of alienness that has motivated the whole project in the first place. Reveling in his growth, his new powers, his knowledge and the beauty of his strange experience, he hails the sun, taunts Cap Com with his superiority, and deliberately lets his capsule fall into the earth's atmosphere and burn.

The trouble with this retelling of McElroy's fiction is that the text of *Plus* in no way resembles the neatly linear and transparent sequence of events presented above. Instead, the narrative of *Plus* is offered almost totally from the internal experiences of the alien-yet-human intelligence of Imp Plus from the moment he first reawakens into a primitive consciousness while in orbit. The narrative shuttles backward and forward in time, weaving the slowly recovered warp of Imp Plus's experiences around the woof of his alien growth until the moment before his fiery plunge back to earth.

This presentation is thoroughly internal; it is narrated in an abstract third-person style, a point of view that seems to put the reader in Imp Plus's mind, to the extent that the reader shares the bewilderment and sense of discovery that Imp Plus has. As we shall see, this dawning sense of novelty is accomplished through stylistic devices chosen to evoke in the reader an amazed and disoriented feeling that recapitulates Imp Plus's. Further, these stylistic devices carry symbolic weight; they are perfectly congruent with the theme of the story about a creature part human and part cybernaut.

McElroy not only traps us in the indefinite present of the capsule with Imp Plus as he orbits the earth, he traps us in Imp Plus's consciousness of these events, fixed inside his world and time, a world and time peculiarly and insistently constituted in what is for all purposes an alien version of the English language.... The abstraction and difficulty of the style...result from two closely allied devices that operate throughout. The first is what the Russian formalists called 'deautomatization,' and the second is a *positive feedback loop in words and images*, a stylistic feature that mirrors nicely the growth of Imp Plus in his capsule. Both are devised to keep the 'uncertainty' or 'variability' or 'entropy' (in the terms of information theory) high, which lends it its special disorienting and wonder-inducing effect. In short, McElroy has applied actual techniques based on cybernetic theory to the construction of his fiction, making his work not merely a science fiction which tells a story about certain technological and scientific speculations, but a truly *cybernetic* fiction."

David Porush  
*The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction*  
(Methuen 1985) 172-75

Michael Hollister (2015)