



Plus

Joseph McElroy

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Imp Plus, a brain removed from an individual with a wife and child, begins to develop self-awareness as it orbits the earth in a space capsule.

Plus Details

Date : Published July 16th 1988 by Carroll & Graf Publishers (first published 1976)

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Author : Joseph McElroy

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ATJG says

Instantly among my favorite novels. I'm going to need some time to cobble together a review for this one. Lovely.

19 January 17

A few days have now passed, but, being the dyspeptic reader I am, who can say how many more days, how many more readings will be necessary before I can articulate the things I now can only intuit about this novel?

Initially, the obvious remark must be made about McElroy's stylistic uniqueness. There's nothing analogous. Friend David M. posits aesthetic kinship with Beckett's *The Unnameable*, and I would have to agree. Beyond that possible connexion, my reading isn't wide enough to suggest another. The narrative feels mechanical with interruptions, cold but for the occasional struck match whose heat and light draw attention as moths would circle in the surrounding dark, or as Imp Plus circles the far blue Earth.

"Seeing that the strange words *radii of color* were true, he could not stop to know why."

The end of the novel I found oddly moving, and I have revisited those final pages a number of times since I first read them. It's idiocy to point out that the entirety of this novel will stand up to infinite readings.

Where now shall I turn with McElroy? The big one, *Women and Men*? I fear that reading it, I'll be struck and killed while bicycling to work and they'll discover on my corpse, in my backpack, my copy of that book with a bookmark 30 pages in, and my wife will observe in her eulogy I spent the final six months of my life turning those 30 pages, and that each night I tossed and turned uncharacteristically.

hearusfalling says

Hard to know where to start with this novel – the usual question of “what’s it about?” doesn’t really seem adequate, almost childish considering this thing. I mean part of the book is about a language beyond language, a journey beyond the frail scope of human existence and into the very fabric of definition and meaning, the foundations of the self – the first real transhumanist novel? maybe.

As Yves Abrioux says in his erudite review (link here) the book is a “posthuman Bildungsroman” which challenges the reader’s powers of apprehension, insofar as its context lies “outside normal human communication”.

The prose of Plus is simultaneously simple and complex, baffling, maddening, beautiful – a potion of words that allows us a stark glimpse into the idea of the Self. As Imp Plus constructs his Self we’re invited to deconstruct ourselves. What we might find in that deconstruction isn’t a view of technology or language (and technological language) as our masters but our intimate relationship with them – how what we are is beyond

familiar semiotics and meaning creation.

Flore Chevailier says in her essay ([link here](#)) that the erotics of McElroy's fiction is based on the exploration of a hybrid language that merges Eros and science. I'd pretty much agree with that, McElroy is acutely aware – as so many writers aren't – of our relationship with technology and how in some ways we've become a kind of technology or a part of it through our engagement with it, the us and them dynamic doesn't work as such, we move and speak and be in the terms of technology now. And his prose often reflects that and Plus is maybe the most explicit example of this.

Imp Plus had lost the knowledge of what had been lost. (6)

And through this Imp Plus thought: or was suddenly looking back at having thought: that those particles that were just missing were driven away by the aim of his looking. (6)

A flash like a thought apart from him popped up. It was a silver sliver. Like the slivers that hung in the lowering light near the algae. Crook-winged waves folded into it long distance. (The light was lowering everywhere). The sliver Imp Plus popped out sailed on. It moved at a lean. A figure shining through the heavens at an angle. Proud filament launched by Imp Plus, its motion a long long breath drawn in. Was why it moved why it kept moving? (71-72)

Elegant, rewarding, and real.

Essentially Plus is about an engineer who died from radiation poisoning and whose his brain has been placed inside a capsule – Imp – blasted into space and is orbiting Earth. Much of the book revolves around Imp Plus attempting to see without eyes and the descriptions of what he “sees”. This seeing becomes a kind of phenomenological exercise, as Imp Plus's new “sight” is merged with his old memories, and we see the seeing of seeing. The memories often take the form of his wife and kid:

Imp Plus looked beyond the strange slivers, looked for the shore, found it grain by grain hacked into by an ax of flesh. Grain upon grain visited salt by salt by waves of foam. He saw fingers in the water but then his own chlorella which the Acrid voice had said was only seaweed. Imp Plus looked for the seashore and saw four long fingers softened by water, saw teethlike digits he knew were toes paddling by the fingers that were bigger in the water. And the underwater fingers went for the toes, which were also swelled by the water. But the toes moved on beyond the fingers and beyond what grew back from the fingers that were hers and what grew still further back deeper in the shallows of the sea. But he found not her but a sunny plasm as if about to dissolve. Undivided she was but a blur of green and blue, orange and yellow and hold plasm, less there than his own chlorella beds were here winking under his eyeless sight here in orbit. (56-57)

Imp Plus's reflections on the past are more than simple nostalgia, in the past he sees not only what he was

but what he can become, memory is a key element in self development and definition and in McElroy's fiction there does seem a preoccupation with the power of memory, notably in how it can aid what we can become.

At the heart of this book is loss – Imp Plus has lost his body but also the body of his wife, he's lost the language that defined himself and thus his self, the end suggests a rebellion against his masters but also suggests he has pushed through his loss and become something anew, there's a kind of bravery about Imp Plus, a kind of spirit even. And I'd argue that this book isn't some cold scientific chore rather a kind of spiritual becoming for a largely secular age.

But the darkness down here was another light, not just the hand and face of the Sun at work in the evening communities of himself. (161)

Part of this novel seems concerned with our relationship with the Earth, with the processes of life on Earth, photosynthesis, the energies of plants and the Sun, where we fit into this and where we are when we lose our bodies but maintain our intellect. Transhumanism is obviously something that has gained more and more traction in recent year as technology continues to progress and McElroy's Plus echoes many of the potential future scenarios talked about by optimistic transhumanists, particularly ideas about leaving your biological body and downloading your consciousness, the novel asks the questions of what we become when such a scenario becomes reality, and McElroy's strength in this novel is that he doesn't really give an answer, it's neither good or bad, it's something beyond that.

He saw the previous leaning that had been present enough to grow into itself. And this not distant past – the earlier tendings and extendings, the dark red or pale green ripples more gradient than motion, the turning of nets of micro-orbits of surface into silk films to see the Sun, yet cloudy silks to slow it – Imp Plus must incline away from the moment of those near memories; for they offered to slide him right down the axis of distance into all the shapes of Earth that could not be his now and would choke him in the words they threw up to him, shadows of what he saw and was and what he meant now instead to see and be, here in himself – that is, apart from Earth. (143-144)

As we can see in the paragraph above, Imp Plus is shedding the idea of his old self or at least the need of it “Imp Plus must incline away from the moment of those near memories”, admitting the disastrousness of his memories and how they threaten to “slide him right down” into his old Earth form and the words of that era of him, how his new self is “apart from Earth”.

Above all this novel is deeply moving.

Cody says

Recipe:

Take one part conventional Science Fiction story
Add two parts 'peppy' dialogue, 1 part vague 'techno' lingo
Slowly pour in love interest
Add 3/4 cup of 'saving the world' histrionics
Simmer on low for 45 minutes
Serve on decorative plate, garnished with edible flowers
Set entire plate on fire, beat it with the blunted side of an axe, and throw it out the window
Put head in blender
Enjoy!

Okay, where to begin? What can be said about *Plus*? I think everyone will get something different out of it. Some will be put-off by its obfuscating first 50 pages. Others (like me) will applaud the effort. What happens when one of the most verbose writers of our time willfully abnegates his ability to show the entire arch of consciousness dawning? McElroy dazzles as his prose gains complexity concomitant with Imp *Plus*' own. Still, it is an incredibly challenging read at the outset.

That's what we're dealing with here: instinct, sentience, cognizance, consciousness, the (re)forming of memory, desire, self-preservation...i.e. the entire experience of Awareness. It really is a thankless task to try to cram into 25,000 pages, much less 215. But, lest you be discouraged, it is ALSO wonderful and tragic and an apt metaphor for exploitation and human longing. (And the occasional glimpse of humor: "he always had a head for numbers.")

As McElroy says, Imp *Plus* is, in many ways, about "a brain becoming information." If that sounds like something that might interest you, I recommend it whole-heartedly. However, if the sentence, "what he was in might well be not other than he" throws you, best to look elsewhere. Either way, there IS tremendous advice for all and sundry within: TRAVEL LIGHT.

Brian says

He knew memory, but saw that it was not the same as remember.

There is a magic at work in this fiction - an illumination of *being* that is almost an impossibility in the telling. Consciousness is a mysticism that works in one direction of time. The blueprints and framework creating the great I are torched as they are made known. It is right and holy and a protection that we don't remember learning the word Mother. Milk. Love. So in penning a work that brings the Reader through that process where our wetwork receives the divine spark, McElroy shines the light. It is told as a process, not a starburst of recognition. We learned levels of self awareness as we would learn to speak language.

There came a time, for this singular reader, when McElroy's taxonomy of consciousness began to read like too much taxidermy of the soul. This is not the fault of the author. I will one day return to this novel. I don't expect that I could learn more, or see his words in a different way. But I can hope. The world isn't done with me yet.

Jon Evans says

This book is a very tough read, but if you enjoy sci-fi then pick it up and give it a try. It's about a brain that has been removed from a body and is orbiting the earth.

??x Nestelieiev says

second reading in translation+app. 10 articles on Plus (+excerpt from Chevalaillier+Tabby+Brooke-Rose books)+several interviews+tons of e-mails to author himself: cyborg-cyberpunk-sci-fi-post-human novel about experiment, especially linguistic one+Paul Weiss conception on cells and Noam Chomsky's famous sentence+more Beckett than Joyce+crazy syntax+neologisms+tragedy without tragedy+brain bairn in cosmic pastoral+story on the unexpected growth=masterpiece

Max Nemtsov says

?????????????????, ?????????????? ? ??????????????????. ?????? ??????????, ?????? ?? ????????, ?????? ? ?????? ? ?????? ?????? (???? ?????? ?????? ?????). ? ?????????? ?????????????????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ?????????????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ?????? "???? ?????? ?????? ??????" (???? ??? ?????????? ?????? ??????????????, ?????????? ?????????????? ? ??????, ??? ???, ????????, ??? ??? ??????????).

Leif says

No. Perhaps you will glean more from Plus than I did if you are less tied to certain conventions of the novel, perhaps you will glean more from Plus if you are less tied (even) to departures from those conventions! Perhaps you will glean more from Plus if you are merely looking for uninteresting symbols placed at calculated distances apart, spaced semi-regularly over an interval of some two hundred pages. Perhaps then, and only then, will Plus reveal its majesty, its true brilliance.

Not for me!

Jonathan says

Joe has given himself an impossible task here. He has attempted to write a text which describes an emerging consciousness, a Being other than Dasien, who has enough of a memory of English words for them to be used in a rational manner. However, there is a fracture between signifier and signified, and an impossibly Other experience of existence being expressed. To give one example – a brain, of course, has no eyes and no nerve endings, so cannot "feel" or "see" in the way we use those words. However, IMP PLUS is connected to a number of sensory devices (for example one measuring the photosynthesis occurring in the plant beds beneath him) and this input is "experienced" in a way which is similar to the way our brain "experiences" the input it receives from our retina. IMP PLUS calls it "seeing", as that is the only appropriate word he can find,

though what it signifies is different. This can make the process of reading, for us Readers, rather confusing.

IMP PLUS also has flashes of memory, which are both beautiful and sad, and which further complicate his Being.

And so it all depends on whether you can enjoy reading in a state of uncertainty, if you can resist the urge to attempt to decipher each sentence so that it makes sense from a human perspective. My advice would just be to let it all flow and see how you feel at the end...personally I enjoyed the whole thing, and found the end rather moving...but you may think differently, of course.

Joe writes in the same way a 3d Printer creates an object.

They create through additive processes, layering successive pieces of a component, building cross-section upon cross-section until an object is formed. Completion, and by completion in this metaphor I mean "understanding" or the state of "having-read" (synonyms in an ideal world, but often not in reality, of course), is only possible once all the layers have been laid.

If we imagine sitting on the tip of the nozzle of some impossibly huge 3d Printer what would we experience? We would, I think, feel something akin to that which occurs in Joe's novels (and this one in particular). We would leap around in seemingly random steps, we would jar and jerk, we would get sea-sick. To pause the printing after the creation of the first line would not assist in uncovering meaning. The meaning is not to be uncovered, it is to be built. There are sentences, paragraphs in this novel which, were we to refuse to move forward until they were "understood", could fix us in place forever. Joe asks for our trust, we must ride out the process until it is complete. It is not linear, but it is not confused, and it is guided by a complex and strict blueprint.

And yet, to step out of this metaphor for a moment, there are individual sentences of great beauty. The music of the prose is stunning. While we wait for meaning to emerge, we can just listen:

"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.

"

"That sight as far off now as a spring day when he'd been touched - he couldn't cast away the touch - by another laughter which moved up the grid of his back, and he had turned from the unhooded carburetor of a car that would not go and had seen first acres of sea crest skimmed by three broad-winged shearwaters"

Evan says

David M says

A philosophical prose poem somewhat in the manner of the Unnameable, an exploration of the limits of personhood. Of course McElroy is far less grotesque than Beckett. The emotional content of his work can be difficult to register. By turns cold, paranoid, new age-y, and surprisingly traditional in his focus on familial themes. In its super-condensed and obscure fashion, Plus runs the gamut of McElroy-isms.

This is now the fifth of his novels I've read. I would rank them in the following order, starting with his magnum opus

Women & Men
Actress in the House
Plus
Ancient History
Lookout Cartridge

??x Nestelieiev says

+++++
review in the form of letter to Joe
+++++

Dear Joe! Greetings from Ukraine!
I hope your day is going well.
I have just finished your Plus (new ebook edition by Dzanc + I've just read your Plus Light you sent me + some articles about it) and I must say the truth - it is an amazing work of art, I think it is more some kind of sci-religious prose poetry than just ordinary prose.

Some Thoughts I Had While Reading

(probably you can just skip this part of my letter but I can't keep silent of my intertextual impressions):
I hope you will have some interest of my humble impressions:

While reading I couldn't stop thinking about Solaris by Stanisław Lem (I'm sure you read it as you read much more than me) - I think the ideas of this novel are quite relative to your Plus (or maybe even antithetical, opposite).

When IMP communicates with Ground it reminded me some McLuhanian discourse:

The [electric] light is pure information. It is a medium without a message (Marshall McLuhan from his Understanding Media: The Extantions of Man).

In my view your prose is just like this light for your devoted readers - something like medium but with message in the shape of pure information.

But the most interesting part is that your Plus reminded me some verses by Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (I

think you`ve heard of him too).

When only dimly did Imp Plus hear the war on the Ground (part 12) - it reminded me passage 5 (or 6 - in some books) of his famous poem VERSES ON THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER (or Lines on the Unknown Soldier in other translations) - one of his last unfinished masterpieces (1937). I've found three translations of this work so I'm quoting them here (once again sorry for my verbiage - I hope it will be interesting for you a little - otherwise once again you can just skim through it):

VERSES ON THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER by Osip Mandelstam

6.

Does the skull have to develop –
From temple to temple, forehead-wide –
So that through its cherished eye sockets
Troops might be poured inside?
The skull develops from living –
From temple to temple, forehead-wide –
With the purity of its seams it teases itself,
Shines as the dome of consciousness,
Foams with thought, dreams about itself,
The cup of cups and the fatherland's fatherland,
With a starry stitch held together,
The cap of happiness – Shakespeare's father...
(Translated by Ilya Bernstein)

Lines on the Unknown Soldier

5

Is that why a skull must develop
Forehead-wide—from temple to temple—
So that into its dear eye sockets
The troops cannot help but pour?
A skull develops because of life
Forehead-wide—from temple to temple—
Mocks the smoothness of its own sutures,
Like an understanding cupola shines clear,
Foams over with thought, dreams of itself—
Goblet of goblets, fatherland to the fatherland,
Cap sewn with starry seams,
Cap of happiness—Shakespeare's father...
(Translated by James McGavran)

Lines on the Unknown Soldier

6.

Is it for this the skull unfolds –
temple to temple - an entire span:
?that armies, their soldiers, still murmur softly
through the precious sockets of his eyes?
A skull unfolds from living –
temple to temple - the entire span –
teasing itself with a purity of stitches,
readying itself as the cupola of insight,

foaming with thinking, dreaming itself itself –
the cup of cups and fatherland of fatherlands –
a cap embroidered with an astral rib –
good fortune's cap of happiness and blessings -
Shakespeare's father.

(Translated by Tony Brinkley and Raina Kostova)

P.(lu)S. Sorry for this chaos of thoughts!

My best wishes to you and your family!

Max.

+++++

Connor says

Probably the best 'science fiction' novel there is. A familiar plot explored in unfamiliar ways; the main questions being 'what is language without the human body' or more abstractly 'what are signifiers without the signs'.

two quotes I enjoyed from articles about this book:

" Plus amplifies semantic uncertainty and disarticulates language into its phonetic and syntactical elements, all the way down to noise, in order to magnify the process by which the relation between mind and communication is established by a cognizing organism. "
and "meaning is no longer semantic but ontological in the sense that it creates its own conditions of reference as self-reference. "

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Hesiod's Theogony.

Freud's myth beyond the pleasure principle.

Genesis chapters one through eleven.

cogito ergo sum --> science.

Schelling's *The Ages of the World*.

Philosophy coming to itself in Hegel's *History of Philosophy*.

Consciousness from the This to Absolute Spirit ; *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Me Tarzan ; You Jane --> Us. Today. Now. Here.

Kasper Hauser.

Helen Keller, from nosight=nohearing=nolanguage to writing *The Story of My Life*.

From immersion of Dasein in everydayness to the thinking of the question of Being.

What is it like to be a bat?

The Benji chapter developed into the Molly chapter.

If a lion could speak.

Cosmicomics.
Joseph McElroy's *Plus*.

Ronald Morton says

Probably the weakest of the three McElroy books that I've read so far (the others at this point being *Women and Men* and *Ancient History*) and yet still a massive undertaking and accomplishment on McElroy's part.

Basically the book is a narrative about consciousness emerging, step by slow step - the narrative starts with basic awareness and then adds layer by layer - with additive vocabulary throughout the process - an awareness, and a remembered memory, that grows throughout the book.

I particularly loved the early attempts at distinction between IMP PLUS's true internal thoughts and his transmissions, as he early on is unable to differentiate between them, and I found the book echoing my own questions about the difference as I was thinking them.

This is one hell of a book, it's just considerably more slight than the other two I've read by McElroy, and yet it is still in its own way just as accomplished. This is a difficult narrative, and it really can't be overlooked how well it's executed, and with it, the sheer talent that McElroy brought to it.
