

# In the Port of Possibility: Interview with Joseph McElroy



*Jacob Siefring*

*In 1952, 1953, 1954, you served in the U.S. Coast Guard. In an autobiographical sketch, you wrote that this was when you “understood for the first time the hugeness of the sea.” Now that you’re at work on the water book, I can look at your work and see water themes strongly present in your earliest work, A Smuggler’s Bible, and in many of your later books. But I am specifically curious what your experience in the Coast Guard was like. Can you describe what you remember of that time?*

I should say first, my mind and my plans are full of books that I’ve put off. I was in two places during the time I was in the Coast Guard. One was a lifeboat station at the tip end of Cape Cod at Race Point, and that was both a lookout station looking for fishing boats that might need help, and it was within about two miles or three miles of Provincetown where the two main search-and-rescue boats that belonged to our lifeboat station were tied up. A picket boat and a diesel lifeboat. They were over thirty feet long, pretty impressive boats. And so when it was necessary to go out into Cape Cod Bay and further to help out with the rescue, often in stormy weather, we’d go zooming into Provincetown and get onto one or both of those boats. That was the first place that I was in.

Then at the end of seven or eight months—partly for personal

reasons, although it was great duty and people were nice, I really enjoyed that time—I decided that I really wanted to have sea duty. And so the chief boatswain's mate, who was the officer in charge of our lifeboat station, agreed to have me put in for sea duty, and they found a place for me on a ship in Portland, Maine, the Coast Guard cutter *Barataria*. So I went zooming up there. And I was on that ship for over a year. It was a 311-ft. buoy tender, or rather seaplane tender from the Second World War, which had been refitted as a Coast Guard cutter to specialize in weather patrol. I didn't know that that's what it was, but that's what it was. The bow cannon was left over from the War, they didn't remove it, and my berthing compartment was right beneath that cannon. We ran maneuvers with the Navy every year including anti-sub warfare exercises—ahead-thrown weapons off the bow, depth charges off the stern, released according to sonar and radar input; and we were never very accurate when the underwater flare burst to the surface indicating where the imaginary sub had been when we fired. And so I was just a seaman on that ship, and we would go out for six weeks at a time in the North Atlantic. Once we had a rescue of a freighter that was foundering, but most of the time we patrolled an area of the ocean which would vary depending on the trip, about twelve miles by twelve miles, and radio back all kinds of information about the weather. It was the ocean, but we had also iceberg patrol off near Greenland and Newfoundland. That was interesting. But it was mostly being on the ship and the weather patrol and the people on the ship, and just getting to know how the ship functioned and being out at sea for a long time.

So I have a lot to praise about the Coast Guard. They're very good people and the work they do is very valuable. As a matter of fact—I hope I'm right on this, it was always said to me—during the Second World War the Coast Guard lost more men in relation to their total numbers than any of the other services including the army, the navy, and the marines. And that apparently—of course the Coast Guard is a small service and it was then under the treasury department, it may still be—that was because the Coast Guard was largely, as it was told to me, in charge of handling the landing crafts when there were landings in the Pacific and perhaps in the European theatre. Their *métier* is small boat handling. Of course some of those boats that brought troops in were anything but small. You've probably seen films of them. That's what the Coast Guard did, and so being

involved in those landings they lost men. And they lost a lot of men. And so when the Coast Guard is sometimes laughed at by the Navy as being... a safe service to be in, it's forgotten the kind of duty that the Coast Guard provides in war zones. That was part of it. And it was partly the history of it all, and partly the meteorology. There were two professional meteorologists aboard, I spent a lot of time talking to them. The sea itself is just to be lived in and to be looked at, and it was quite different from growing up in Brooklyn Heights where the sea was also important. At one point we had an apartment that was right on the harbor in Brooklyn, and that's what I saw every morning, every evening, and in all weathers. So I think that the sea, the harbor, all that's been very important to me from growing up in Brooklyn. But I had not been to sea until I was in the Coast Guard.

*Was it after you got out of the Coast Guard that you began your Ph.D.?*

Yes, I kind of backed into it. I said before that there have been—there are—books that I knew I was going to write, and they take a long time. I may have mentioned to you that there is a book that goes back to 1948 and '49 which I'm at last, sort of in tandem with the water book, finishing. It's odd, and I think it's probably better if I don't even speak of it. But the delay in finishing it is not entirely understandable to me. Anyway, that book's getting done. And another one very nearly took me away from returning to graduate school, and I've always had mixed feelings about that. When I was in the Coast Guard, it's 1954 coming to a close, and I had been to Columbia to graduate school, and I had always held out the possibility that I might go back. It wasn't exactly the experience of being on board the ship as it was a sense of it being a transitional, hard-to-define postwar time in America, in the United States. Although I'd never written a novel, though I'd written things all my life, I felt that as somehow launched by or spurred by that time aboard ship and the complicated relationships that were observable at close quarters in a crew. Because of what a Coast Guard cutter does—numbered about 140 people if you can imagine that—I had a society in my head and connected to what was going on in the United States. It was a very typical time, and I think we didn't know what was happening. I think of Norman Mailer's essay book, I forget the title of it now...

Advertisements for Myself?

Yes, *Advertisements for Myself* as expressing something of that time. I felt that my experience aboard the cutter was connected to that. And so I thought what I should do, I should have the courage to do it, was write that book as soon as I got off the ship, as soon as I got out of the Coast Guard in the fall of '54. But I didn't. Which is not to say that I didn't work on it, but I just didn't write that book. And I think in the long run it was a wise decision because while it would've been great to write bestsellers like Irwin Shaw or somebody else, I think I had a feeling, and not with a great deal of confidence, that the books were going to be in some way complicated, not unreadable at all, but that they were going to be a strange amalgam of experience, of philosophical adventure, and realism, and emotion, and somehow my country also. And so I think I felt that I was going to write what I wanted to write, but I didn't expect necessarily to make my living off of it. And I think that it was probably that that made me not put all my eggs in the basket of that first novel. And so it didn't get written, although it may someday be finished. And parts of it I think have appeared, absorbed, you know, the narratives that I've written.

But the book that I thought of that last six months in the Coast Guard didn't get written and instead I went back to Columbia which I enjoyed a great deal and did more graduate work and eventually got a Ph.D. When I left Columbia to go to teach at the University of New Hampshire I had not finished my thesis and I wanted to find out if I enjoyed teaching. I didn't know whether I would or not. And if I had not enjoyed it I would have felt that I couldn't do it well, and if that was the case then I simply would abandon that whole thing. And I always kept alive in my mind that I would write short stories and essays and plays and novels and all of that. So I went back to Columbia and got most of the degree done except the thesis and then went up to New England to teach. I think that it was just as well, because I'm a good teacher. I really enjoy it. It's difficult to teach and write at the same time, but I feel that it's perfectly possible to do that. That's the way that I sort of survived for a long time. Which is not to say that the books beginning with *A Smuggler's Bible* were not filled with anxiety and, you know—will I be able to do this?—and experiment in such a way that I didn't know how the work was going to come out. So that's sort of the way it happened. Over the course of my life I've always run into American writers, very educated people, who apparently feel defensive and sometimes will try to say that if you

are teaching, let's say in a university, you'll never be a writer. And I think that's just not true, I think it all depends. It worked out for me, that's all.

*I see from Columbia University's library catalog that you wrote your dissertation on Henry King, the contemporary of John Donne.*

I did. That's an example I feel, again, of my getting something fixed in my mind, my head, my decision-making powers, that was perhaps not as adventurous or in fact even as wise as what I might have done. I've forgiven myself for it. It's not the same kind of difference between writing a novel, my first novel, beginning in 1954, instead of going to Columbia. It's rather a difference between two subjects. What I did was to write a thesis on Henry King rather than a thesis which I think would've been easier to get published and which would have been a kind of critical biography of the novelist Henry Green. And I mention that because there was a teacher, one of my mentors at Columbia, for whom in a seminar I'd written an essay on Green's nine novels and an autobiographical book of his. I was not myself absolutely sure how important Green was. Imaginative and original, no question. The essay was pompous, and it was overelaborate, and it needed some editing, but he liked it a lot. And so when I passed my orals, he said—we were talking about my thesis—why don't you get a fellowship and go over to London and talk to Henry Green and do a critical biography of Henry Green. Of course Green became much better known after that, ten years later. I see now if I had done that, that might have had consequences that would have tied me more to the university and to scholarship. I'm not sure.

But I didn't do it, partly because I felt that Green was less important than some writers of the 17th century whom I admired very much. And I thought I wanted to write a thesis in the 17th century. But what happened eventually when I got up to New Hampshire was that I became interested in one poem of Bishop King's. Then I investigated all the other poems that he had written. Then I got interested in his sermons and to some extent his life. He was Donne's literary executor, I think, or maybe his executor. The connection with Donne was I think probably overly important for me, because Donne is almost my favorite writer. I don't really speak of favorite writers—I mean, how can you speak of a favorite writer? But I think that Donne, who is less important than Shakespeare, and

less important than Milton, but highly original and complex in a way that I have always felt very close to, attracted me. And so having decided partly for reasons even of a kind of snobbery that I would not write about Henry Green but I would write somehow about the 17th century, I got drawn into Henry King's best poem, which is called "The Exequy," which is an elegy for his dead wife. And knowing that King was not a first-rate poet, but a person of some interest I eventually did my thesis on Henry King.

So, two Henrys. And the dissertation on King came out of all this. It's okay. I have a copy of it here. I never tried to get it published. I don't think it's all that interesting. People ask about it. But I worked hard to make the subject interesting. That is to say, I know that Henry King is not inherently as interesting as many poets of his time.

*I continue to be surprised though that bibliographies of your work indicate no fiction published before A Smuggler's Bible. Your first novel is so innovative in narrative technique and masterful in its uses of language. Had you really published nothing before A Smuggler's Bible? Why did you wait so long to publish your fiction?*

I went to England with my first wife, determined at that point to write a book. Not of that title, but a title which suggested that it would be plural and composed of parts that would be only loosely joined. And that became *A Smuggler's Bible*. And I had real doubts about the rationale of it, because it seemed to me that it might be novellas or short stories that I was trying to push into some kind of connection. But as it developed, I think that the risk was the right one to take. And I think that the sort of precarious coherence among those eight parts was the way I should have gone and did go. But before '62, there was a period of ten years after Williams when I went on writing, but nothing that I really wanted to publish or tried to publish as a novel.

I think that for a while I was under the impression that you wrote short stories and then you graduated to the novel. And then I realized, thinking of Thomas Wolfe and any number of other writers whom I admired like Dos Passos, that that wasn't so and that the short story was a quite different animal. Although I have always wanted to write short stories and never felt too comfortable writing them, I do go on writing them. And I wrote them during that period when I also was in the Coast Guard and went back to graduate school and Columbia.

I think that Columbia had considerable influence on me simply because of the reading. I was quite happy there, and I realized I think there that the novels that I would write would not necessarily be literary, as the publishers liked to call them, but they would be more free and more expansive and would not cleave to the sound of a more conventional American novel. So I think that that was one impact that going back to graduate school had upon me—to remind myself of the options. I remember one of my colleagues in graduate school saying before we parted—I think we never saw each other afterwards, he went to a teaching job somewhere else—he said, “I know that you’re going to do something extraordinary, and I think you’re going to write books.” I was surprised that he said that. Not that I’m humble, but I’m fairly modest about myself, and I was surprised that I had made that impression on him. And I think it was not just the impression of a smart graduate student with whom he would discuss subjects and books—because that’s one of the nice things about graduate school.

That was about 1954 or 1955. I had plays and poems and the beginnings of novels, and I always had *Fathers Untold* which was begun in 1948 and which I have always believed in. I now have been writing it all my life. And it’s only a novel, that’s all, it’s not the summing up of anything. But I was writing it as early as eighteen, I think. And you can say I was unable to finish it, or you can say I was unwilling to finish it, or it wasn’t quite right or something like that. And when I look at what’s happened since *Women and Men*, there are a lot of other projects on the table. I guess I’ve written a lot. But the projects on the table are not finished books.

There’s one that I began when I was teaching at Queens College around 1989 or so, around the time that I published *The Letter Left to Me*. There’s a novel about a changeling and I set some store by that. But it’s not finished. And from the 1980s, when I and my wife, Barbara, a painter, spent a lot of time in New Mexico and I worked with a counter-culture farming group, I have two boxes full of manuscript for a book called *Talavaya*, which is a Hopi word for the time of day early in the morning when the Hopi farmer gets up and looks at the fields down in the valley below the mesas and says a prayer about the ground and the crops and so forth. That novel is going to get done some day, and it exists in considerable manuscript. But that’s an example of something that I embarked upon with

passion. It still exists but I just haven't finished it. Am I someone who doesn't finish things? The nine novels that I have published, and I'd add to that two or three other books—essays and a novella—are not exactly the mark of somebody who doesn't finish things. But I don't feel that I'm like Paul Valéry and reluctant to yield up a manuscript to the publisher. I just think that when it isn't right, you don't declare it finished.

And there's a lot of other stuff. There's a screenplay that I now set considerable store by, which is of the last five years. That's set in Manhattan, although it has an American desert source as well. There's a libretto which I began with a German composer, and I decided I didn't like his music enough. It's very good, but it's just not for me and it didn't seem to suit the libretto that I had written. I think, now, down the line, Boone [McElroy's adult son] is going to score it for me.

So your original question has to do with what happened after Williams. I wrote, I would say, and I read. It was partly a matter of confidence too. I didn't feel that what I wanted to be my prose, my vision, was adequately embodied in my writing.

*Was it hard to find an agent and a publisher for that first book?*

Well, I didn't do much about that. When I was in England writing *A Smuggler's Bible* I sent a couple of pieces to publishers who got back to me in language that I thought was terribly stupid. They didn't really understand what I was writing at all. And these were not difficult, these were early drafts of the first two or three chapters of *A Smuggler's Bible*. And they said, sort of, get back to us. But what happened was that when the book was all done and I'd been communicating with Richard Howard, the poet and translator, who was a friend of mine from Columbia, he'd been very encouraging. He admired *A Smuggler's Bible* enormously and he eventually wrote a review of it. And he was the one who gave the book to Georges Borchart. And so it was through Richard Howard that I got my first agent.

I don't know that that's significant, really. I think especially with a novel, a large bunch of manuscript, that the weight is so inconvenient and exhausting when you do it yourself. And you don't know whether the publisher has put it in a stack somewhere, whether the publisher's read it or the first chapter or the first ten pages, and said, *well, we'll see, we'll think about it*, and then nothing happens. I know young writers

now who wait six months. And it's soul-destroying, you know. It's very upsetting, and there may be no alternative. But if you have an agent, at least you have someone who has professional contact with the publisher and can give a description to the publisher of the book and can get after the publisher to decide.

Richard Howard was of immense help in putting me in touch with Georges Borchardt, who was mainly known as representing Samuel Beckett and a lot of French writers and some adventurous American writers. He took to my work right away. We had some disagreements later over *Women and Men*, and that's when I went to Melanie Jackson. But I can't say enough for George Borchardt, certainly at the beginning, because he believed in the adventure of my fiction and he thought it had value. And he said, *With persistence you're going to do well and be famous*. I don't know that I would have known about George Borchardt even, but Richard put me in touch with him. So I'm forever grateful to Richard for reading the early draft of *A Smuggler's Bible* and encouraging it and really understanding what was interesting with the book. It reminded him of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. But he did put me in touch with Georges Borchardt, so that made a big difference. I'm really sympathetic to young writers, especially now when fiction is harder to place, even though there are many, many small independent publishers. I've got one now. Even now, it's very hard for a young novelist to get read.

*I want to ask you about the neural, or neuronal, quality of your writing. The title of your essay "Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts" (1975) suggests this, and I've also found some truth in a claim I read that your writing has the capacity to make the neurons tingle. Can you talk about this at all? Where does this neuronal quality of your work come from?*

Well, you know I wrote this book *Plus*. And I've been interested in neuroanatomy. And... but I'm not exactly a nerd. I think I always felt that science and technology, different kinds of science, were part of the language that we speak in these times. And I was never really interested in writing science fiction, and I think that *Plus* probably is not science fiction, it's some hybrid, transcendental science fiction type. I don't know what it is. But I think I often felt drawn between, divided between, threatened by a division that is in us as well as in me, between the organic, normal observer of the world, and someone

slightly crazy. And by that all I mean is that our ideas, our perceptions, our ways of understanding the world and putting that into words—all of that is, seems to me connected to a brain. But I don't really mean that, it's connected to networks in our whole physiology, not only upstairs but the whole body, that embrace the autonomic, and embrace the very powerful, and embrace the animal and the chaotic and the very mysterious.

So, not to turn this into a dichotomy exactly, because we think in twos, we think maybe too easily in terms of two, I still felt that tensions in me that were part of my vision and my desire to speak were drawn between this kind of straightforward, ordinary-citizen kind of person with a body, and this other being that is connected to, that arises from, the just unbelievable complexity of the brain, the mind, the body, and that is not understood. Its power is used. Something like that. I think it's in *Lookout Cartridge*, I know that it's in *Women and Men* but I think it's in all my work, I think it's certainly in *A Smuggler's Bible*, but I think it's in *The Letter Left to Me*, where the young man, or the boy if you will, in the sentences, in many, many of the sentences, most of the sentences—is both here, and moving ahead. He's both here and in the future. And I feel that there's a sense in him, not only of the civilized, articulate teller of the story of a letter and how it got taken away from him twice—he didn't learn the first time, he let it happen the second time—that he's telling the family story in a way, which is partly about bereavement and partly about freedom. He's telling this story, which is maybe the most straightforward of all my stories—although I'm told that it's complicated, and I think it is complicated—but I think that's represented by his being here and now in the present, but also always pushing ahead into the future and being in two places at the same time. And I think often in the syntax of the sentences, that he's these two—not these two people—but these two forces, and that there's a hidden force which is driving him which he doesn't understand himself. And, in fact, I'm getting back to that in the 1948 novel which I'm at last finishing now. And I'm making that a little bit more articulate and explicit than I have before.

So I don't know whether that makes any sense. But I think... for lack of a better metaphor, I think there are these two forces, and that the unseen force which is not really like D.H. Lawrence [*laughs*], it's more like Henry Adams, I'm not sure. But it's something which is complex, and it's sometimes representable in terms of neurophysiology

and representable in other forms.

And... I also do want to mention that there's a guy in France who's written about me named Yves Abrioux. He has an essay about *Lookout Cartridge* and *Women and Men* in which he says that what is unusual about me is that I have given body to the mind, or given body to the mental, or given body to the brain, or given body to these complicated processes that could be called neural. I don't know what I would think if I read it now, but that's Yves Abrioux. When I read it. I thought, he's got it, he's got a line on me. It's nothing that I would want to make more articulate than that. But something about the novel being or giving body to the mind.<sup>1</sup>

*Yes... I think there's something mysterious and elusive about that question that may be hard to respond to fully.*

No, I think it's an important question, but I don't feel really able to be more articulate about it than that. I think maybe the novels are articulate. What happens in this other novel—actually there are two—there's *Voir Dire*, which is a big long one, which goes from 1991, but this other one that began in 1948 called *Fathers Untold*, I think it maybe gets into that neuronal chaos that one protects oneself from, but one also wants to enter and make use of somehow. We'll see, I don't know what the book will be like.

*I want to ask you about something one of your characters said about reading and books. Generally speaking, I think we regard books and education as empowering, as liberating. But for Michael Amerchrome of A Smuggler's Bible it has become something like a burden or a hazard. He says, for instance: "I gave up reading because I was paralyzed by quantity." Also: "the further I read, the more thinly I felt I was spreading myself." Did you ever feel this way? Have you, for instance, ever felt it difficult to negotiate the dialogic relationship between reading and writing?*

You mean to become a reader rather than a writer?

*Yes. I'm thinking about the opposition between the two acts. I mean, whether or not Michael Amerchrome speaking there is you at one time. Or if you felt as he does: "the further I read, the more thinly I felt I was spreading myself."*

Yes, I think that's part of me. I knew a writer in France called Léonie Bruel, and I liked her a lot. But she believed in not reading

anything. Because if you read—you know it's bullshit, but—if you read, it's going to destroy the voice that you have. She was an extreme realist, there was nothing experimental about her. She wrote about coal miners in France. That sticks in my mind because when we were talking I realized that, maybe to a fault, I read and read and read and read. And I'm interested in books. And then later I sorted it out and I figured that one's consciousness is always sorting things out, and what comes to the surface or at least what you can access to work with is never all this learning that you have, this reading. But I think that there was a time when I was maybe drawn between would I write or would I—well, I would always write—but would I write, or would I be maybe a scholar? Undoubtedly a scholar writing, but not a writer in the same sense.

And I think also whatever that feeling is that the character has, there's a fear of being flooded. And it's most of the time a very modest fear and it doesn't affect me much. I was just thinking today, looking around at the books here in this apartment, that I'm so lucky, you know, *I'm so lucky* to be a reader and I'm thinking about how other people spend their time and waste their time or at least spend their time, and I'm so lucky to hear these other voices, you know, to be exposed to them and to let them help me think or sometimes help me escape.

So I don't have really more than a kind of chaotic reaction to your question about the character. There are times when I have felt that way but mostly I just wish I had three or four lives to not only give all the time that I want to to writing, but to do all the reading that I haven't done.

[*interviewer laughs*]

But not because I think I ought to or that I'm going to be on the \$64,000 question or anything like that or even to be able to talk to Boone about it, but just because it's such a pleasure, you know. And that's why it's parallel to my amazement about how people lack curiosity. I'm sure you run up against it all the time, you must. When young people say, have read this and that, this bestseller, and often I have not, I always take down the title and maybe I'll get around to reading it. But another part of my mind is saying, well, you want me to read this thing or that thing, but have you read Dostoyevsky? Or, have you read Plato? Have you read the really important stuff? And usually not. And I make my peace with that. I don't get angry about

it, I don't preach. But I think that the books that we have are so incredibly valuable and that the life that we have is not long enough to be acquainted with them that it's kind of a frustration that some of these acquaintanceships I will never make. When I was visiting Jeffrey Allen's class at the New School on Wednesday, we were talking a little bit about books and how important I think it is for writers to read. It may be perfectly true that writers are driven to writing by painful experiences, by experiences of love or of betrayal, or who knows what, and they're also driven by other things. I think that they're driven to write, or they write as they do because of the reading that they're doing at the moment. I think we're very literary in that regard.

My connection with that is very sophisticated, because I've read so much and I've thought so much about the kind of voice that seems natural to me. If it is an amalgam of other voices, if it is influenced by other voices, it's been somehow compacted or turned into something else. But I know that it's not only a deep consciousness of myself, of someone joyful and someone hurt, someone historical, and someone impulsive, all of those things. It isn't only that Joe. It's also a lot that I've read. And so it may be that when I'm anxious about spreading myself too thin, whether it's reading or writing, I'm aware of how much there is that's accessible to us in books. Of course, I'm always always hungry to meet people. There's also that, you know. So I'm not sure I can give you a very coherent statement on what Michael Amerchrome said.

*I think you already did, Joe, I think you already have. I want to ask you about the Internet. Particularly I'm thinking of one book that appeared in 2010, you might have heard it, by Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing to Our Brains. As you began to use the Internet, I presume in the '90s—and I know you use the Internet like everybody else now, and on a regular basis—does the Internet make it harder to get into a mode where you're immersed in your work? Is there a pull away from that interior world of the novel and of the book?*

There was a time fifteen years ago, maybe twenty years ago, when someone, a friend of mine, criticized me for long e-mails, for treating the e-mail like the old hand-written letter, or the typed letter. And I think it's true that I do. I don't know that that is really using too many words. I think what it is is being warmed by the e-mail. And since I'm someone a little bit paranoid who wants to go to the post office when

he finishes a letter and mail it, although one doesn't do that anymore except for bills, I feel gratified that I can send a substantial e-mail to you, or to my son, or to Robert Walsh, Marie Barrientos, Nick Pappas, a close circle of friends I depend on. For what? I wonder, but I do. Also my daughter, Hanna. And it goes right to them. Whether they read everything in it, I don't know. E-mail and the Internet I know are not the same thing. But I think e-mail has been very comforting to me, as if I can speak to someone in written down words and I don't have to wait for three days to imagine their receiving it. So I think that's been good.

I don't think that I'm much interested in the cyber alternatives and potentialities, like what Bob Coover used to teach and probably still does. And that's I think a regard in which I'm not a postmodernist. I'm probably a postmodernist in an uneasy, unresolved, still negotiable quality of the reality that my books are about. And I'm probably a postmodernist in that I do go in for parody at times. But I think basically I'm not a postmodernist. I think I'm just not too interested, in spite of what I said that Monday night [during the reading McElroy gave at the New School]—*what could happen?* is what I said and *what could happen?* is a very important question—in spite of that I think that the answer to it doesn't go in the direction of Coover's cyberfiction—that interpretation of Ovid's endless changes—not the only Ovid, as I show in my water book. But it goes in the direction of a kind of discerning, philosophical, more commonsensical approach. What is the most interesting solution to the dilemma that you find yourself in at this point in the story? What's the most interesting solution? Not many solutions, but I guess one, you know, the one that's more interesting than the other.

I think that cyberfiction has opened up the possibility of many endings, parallel work, maybe a little bit like what Burroughs was talking about. But I'm not interested in that. I think it makes me uneasy. And I'm not really confusing this with the Victorian novel's double-ending, like in *Great Expectations* and then in our day *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Two endings are like one. But cyberfiction conceives of there being innumerable endings, and the richness of this, of the imagination, is all very well. I guess that's healthy. Maybe you keep it to yourself as a kind of energy that you can use.

But to turn what used to be the text into a limitlessly openable and multipliable experience is not too interesting to me. In fact it's

not interesting to me at all. And so insofar as that is connected to the Internet, the cyberpathways, I guess I don't much go along with it. The advertising and the information, most of that I think is a drag. But I do use Google. And there was a long time when I thought, "I have to go to the library"—you know, I go to the Columbia library, to the NYU library, I go to my own library. I like doing that. But I realize that as long as one is careful and thoughtful, Google has an astonishing amount of quick information. I use it.

*In 2003, you asked Harry Mathews whether writing should hurt. Your asking of that question may have been due to the fact that Mathews's texts can appear opaque and nonsensical. Now, as you know, some commentators, some of them very astute and others of them inept, have called your own work difficult. How do you respond to this question, which you yourself formulated: Should writing hurt?*

Well, I think the answer is yes, it should. I think it should, I think there should be an out-of-control feeling projected by the work. As there is so originally in Donald Barthelme's fictions. Let's say we're talking about fiction, though I think the water book has some of it also, that's non-fiction. It's that we are tipped out of ourselves into something a little larger than ourselves. It's partly connection with other people. It's partly thinking, it's partly regret, it's partly imagination. And this is a painful process. I think that there is an awful lot of writing that in many, many different ways is safe, and I wouldn't feel this if I didn't feel that I am guilty of this myself. Someone wrote me an e-mail the other day saying, would you contribute to an anthology that this guy's putting together, or some essay that he's writing. He wants to know why writers write, so tell us why you write. I'm not going to do that, I don't want to do that. First of all, don't trust a writer when the writer tells you why. [*laughs*] And second, there are just so many different reasons. But as I talk to you right now—it's all a metaphor of one kind or another—I would think that I write partly in order to remove the cloak, to remove the veil, to make myself naked. And by that I mean to tell as much of the truth about what I feel life is like as I can. And you know that doesn't mean telling the story of my mother growing up in Freehold, New Jersey, it doesn't mean Brooklyn Heights, it doesn't mean autobiography in the usual crass sense that people mean when they say, Is your work autobiographical? It doesn't mean that at all. It means a stripping away.

It keeps me going. It's hope, it's a kind of wonderful gift and hope that I have, a hope that I can further strip away something which I'm hiding from myself about what I've seen. I think everybody has it if they could just let themselves reach it, whether it's in this art or some other.

And I didn't mean to imply that in Oulipo or any other work of Harry's—highly sophisticated, often very funny work, he's got an astonishing and liberating sense of humor—that he was shielding himself from something that I would call raw, or more real. I didn't mean that at all. I was simply asking the question because I think it's a question that Harry's work tends not to ask. And that's okay too. It's an issue. As I say, it's to do with hope and a feeling of being blessed, although I don't know who would be blessing me. But I feel blessed because there's more of this to do all the time, I feel I haven't finished. It's not exactly that there is a particular book I need to write. It's that the process of stripping away goes on, and it's not only exciting and scary, but it's interesting, it's just interesting.

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<sup>1</sup> See Yves Abrioux's essay "Vectorial Muscle in a Great Field of Process," where Abrioux argues that "McElroy's fiction engages a complex notion of embodied cognition, intimately tied to or crossed with action" (*electronic book review*, August 2004).