

THE «BEAST-LANGUAGE» OF AN AMERICAN POET

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Our participation in nature and the creation of a new language are the two main features developed by Michael Mc'Clure in the mid-sixties. This is most clearly seen where his verse is envisaged as an extension of his own body and spirit «poetry is a muscular principle and a revolution for the body-spirit and intellect and ear.»¹ This new poetic tendency is established even more evidently in his *Meat Science Essays* (1963), where he seeks a bio-alchemical aesthetics containing a verbal energy prodigious in its power of communication. Later, books like *Ghost Tantras* (1967), *September Blackberries* (1968), *Hail Thee Who Play* (1968), *The Mammals* (1972), *Jaguar Skies* (1973), *Gorf* (1974), *Antechamber and Other Poems* (1975), *Rare Angel* (1975) and *The Grabbing of the Fairie* (1978) reveal an author fascinated by his own physical condition and immersed in a universe seen as a «single flow, vibration, or aura» (WN 204) of inter-relationships.

This theme is recurrent in his poetry, adding to the complexity of the poet's intentions. Along with his interest in physicality and the evident presence of his own body, he adds the awareness that although we cannot perceive the non-material universe, other energy fields exist, that once discovered, will increase communication and be considered equally physical (WN 206). In any case, a desire for re-integration in nature is clearly conveyed, rooted in his wish to feel as primal as possible, i.e. as «mammal-animal» rather than as a passive subject completely determined by cultural values. This is one of the basic aspects most noticeable in the poet's later stage, involving some interesting consequences. Among them, how human behavior

1. This statement by Michael Mc'Clure on the cover of *Ghost Tantras* is explicit about his desire to connect poetry and physicality. Hereon I use the following abbreviations on referring to his work: *Ghost Tantras*, (GT); «Wolf Net,» (WN); *Rare Angel*, (RA); *September Blackberries*, (SB); *Muscled Apple Swift*, (MAS); *Dark Brown* (DB); *Hymns to St. Geryon*, (HSG); *Hail Thee Who Play*, (HTWP); *The Mammals*, (TM); *Gargoyle Cartoons*, (GC).

becomes a process of learning about oneself and the surrounding environment. The man-animal is also able to develop harmony and more satisfying surroundings, attending to its needs by adapting other natural elements. Nor can we forget the creative role permitting this primal situation to be uncomplicated by conventional restrictions or traditions. Of course this perspective is not totally innovative in American literature, we must remember the integrating fervor of Walt Whitman and the transcendental harmony Henry D. Thoreau found in the forests of Maine, but in Mc'Clure one may observe a more intense fusion of subject, nature, science and literary expression.

This urge to join these aspects together has a lot to do with the admiration Mc'Clure felt for the Nobel Prize winner Sir Francis Crick (discoverer of the molecular structure of DNA along with Sir James Watson). Traditionally, artists have paid more attention to intimate, subjective perceptions and the scientist has preferred to concentrate on the fundamental laws of nature. But in this case, in accordance with the worldview of the new humanism, Crick has lately turned into a philosopher analyzing new paradigms, while Mc'Clure has kept producing poetry where knowledge of structural elements, functions and responses common to all life-forms coexist with the direct life experience of individual creatures: «Bio-alchemical investigations –Bconcerns with the shapes and meanings of bodies– are inseparable from poetics. Experience in all times and spaces in the mainstream. The ability to sensorially perceive without the constraint of traditional, modern proportions is the joy of the yogi, the adept, the poet, and the scientist of meat.» (RA back cover)

Michael Mc'Clure has made great effort in his later poetic stage to comprehend how natural systems function in an integral, holistic way. There are numerous references in his poems and essays to the role of matter, atomic behavior or the potentialities of proteins or cells. These remarks run parallel to his literary language, or take on equal importance. His most conclusive statement is that «FOR EVERY LEVEL OF ORGANIZATION, MATTER DISPLAYS DIFFERENT PROPERTIES. AND MATTER IS SPIRIT.» (SB 7). His interest in poetry as an organic form is born from this enthusiasm for science. This concept implies that certain forms lie within all things (and our experience) and that the poet's mission is to discover and reveal them to others. Denise Levertov defined this type of poetry as «a method of apperception,» (420) able to recognize that what we perceive is based on our intuition of how the natural order functions, that a form exists beyond forms, and where the creative efforts of men are analogies or allegories of nature. Evidently, such poetry is an exploration of the natural world. Indeed, there are plenty of examples to illustrate the above idea. Mc'Clure takes this even further, his aim is for the readers to immediately see their human and mammal condition and not be simply passive entities, consumers of mere analogies. For this, altered typography is used frequently to emphasize the author's intentions: e.g. capitals at key points, verses of different length, animal sounds, puns and repetitions...

The use of language as analogy of nature is a recurrent device in much of his work. For example in *September Blackberries* he draws our attention to the interrelation of various organs of the body during the construction of the poem itself,

without attributing some more importance than others. These organs lend subtlety and intuition to the perception process:

OUR EYES AND EARS AND NOSE ARE DOTS
of intelligence! (SB 125)

Curiously, his poem *Muscle Apple Swift* was produced by a small publishing company as a chapbook in a limited edition of 150 copies, as if the poet wished his confession of being a mammal to be known first by people who would understand it immediately, and then later to restate this condition in public with a commercial publisher. It is a clear example of how his universe is definitely «mammalian» and for this purpose he makes his words stand out in capitals:

THE BEAST IS NOT CRUEL
THE BEAST IS NOT GUILTY
THE BEAST IS NOT GUILTY OF MEAT MICHAEL
THE BEAST IS GUILTY OF MEAT MICHAEL BEING A MAMMALIAN
UNDER CONTROL OF THE SONG DIRECTED BY MEAT BRAIN
UNDER CONTROL OF NOTHING THIS IS LIBERTY. (MAS 28)

Here Mc'Clure is really speaking about his identity and reminds us that this mammalian nature is to be found «inside of solid meat caves.» Let us remember however, that for him what is special about this is the awareness of being composed not only of biological material, but also spirit and the transcendental:

MEAT MICHAEL OBSESSED BY MEAT MICHAEL OBSESSED BY
MEAT
MICHAEL LION LEAPING BOOTS DRUGS BEATING MEAT
EVERYTHING
IS OK
CLEAN SPIRIT MEAT MICHAEL (MAS 28)

If we trace his poetic development, we see Mc'Clure's interest in avant-garde poetry, which although its meaning or nature is always difficult to categorize, is typified by superseding the paradigms in vogue up to that time. Since his arrival in California from Kansas, where he was born 20 October 1932, the same day as the French poet Rimbaud as he points out significantly on the cover of *Ghost Tantras*, Mc'Clure took part in what has been called the San Francisco Renaissance during the fifties along with Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Thomas Parkinson and Robin Blaser. In the second half of that decade he became involved specifically in the «beat» movement, and has been somewhat stigmatized as a typical beat poet ever since then,

especially because of the poetry reading he gave at Gallery Six together with the most famous members of that movement: Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch y Allen Ginsberg. Indeed the best story about that event was told by another famous beat author, Jack Kerouac, who in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) offers us a wide source of anecdotes about the origins, causes and phenomena surrounding the poetry reading in question. For me, the importance of this is not so much their drug experimentation or flirtations with lightweight anarchism, but rather the sense of rebellion, and alignment with other «pioneers» who envisaged new literary styles and lifestyles, open to further experimentation.² In this sense, I see Whitman as an essential influence in Mc'Clure's career, not only as precursor of free open verse, but because of his liberalism, deep respect for other people, and of course identification with nature as a means of liberation. Mc'Clure found a hymn for the new generation in «Song of Myself.» He also found a way of progressing in self-knowledge through nature, to such a point that in his later period his interest in uniting biology and culture, science and humanism, shows he found deep roots in Whitman's poetic work.

Besides these influences, there exists another constant in his poetry, that of leaving an imprint on the reader's mind, in his body and its muscles, alerting one that there are unannounced correspondences and at the same time offering a melody to be experienced physically:

THOUGHT
is
a
muscular
sensation
pouring outward like
pseudopods with feathered hoofs. (RA 37)

Within this evolutionary process, Mc'Clure has had to search for a new language to provide more obvious connections between literary fact and physical experience. This intention has borne with it the need for what Roszack has denominated «transpersonal language,» where one is conscious that the self cannot handle all the processes going on at the same time, and language therefore must reflect the interconnections between body, mind, society and nature.³ The new

2. Ihab Hassan summarizes the spirit of the beat poets: «Their spirit is antic, reckless. Madness, drugs, anarchy are elements of their experience, and so are the sacred texts of the world. Blasphemy and obscenity are expressions of their revolt and of their search for beatitude. Their heroes are the usual masters of the open style, from Whitman to Williams, and the visionary poets, from Blake and Rimbaud to Artaud.» *Contemporary American Literature* 118.

3. Theodore Roszack notes that all personal agents disappear and puts forward the «ecological model» as fundamental: «one must imagine processes happening of their own accord, producing the numberless symbiotic patterns and balances we call 'nature,' and among them that pattern of mind, body and society we call human consciousness.» *The Making of a Counter-Culture* 189.

language proposed by Mc'Clure had to evoke the tangible presence of what is being said and at the same time make the reader conscious that we are immersed in a system full of interrelations. A good example of this is his book *Rare Angel*, where words are recognized as cells of a poem and at the same time particles of an angel's body, representing the unity of history and prehistory, or of protozoa and the stars. He begins by evoking the presence of a human body with huge emphasis on its physicality:

AND SO WE STRETCH OUT
(it is a muscular sensation
from the neck and shoulders
through the arm... (RA 13)

The course followed by this poem is a winding one, since it travels from the world of mind to that of nature, from laughter to spacecraft; the gesture of stretching out an arm at the beginning of the poem can be seen as inviting us to participate in his visionary universe. The poem is a river where voices, scenes, and multiple, sometimes dislocated references are flowing downstream. To this end, Mc'Clure shows his abilities by mixing typographical devices like insistent capital letters, exclamation marks, dotted lines, enjambments and evocations of palpable elements. He is capable of joining a passionate sensuality with the most serious reflection that literature and life are fused, as seen in this excerpt:

WE ARE THE RIVER POURING TO THE ROOTS
THAT FEED THE BLOSSOM
WE ARE THE RIVER!...
WE ARE THE RIVER!...
everything is flowing,
everything can see... All waves
have eyes!
Literature and life can melt together! (RA 23)

Obviously the American context Mc'Clure is immersed in offers us numerous examples of these same intentions of integrating man with nature. One of the most recurrent instances of this can be found in traditional Native American poetry, which clearly shares this sense of wholeness, adding a religious tinge to this union between body and environment. For Mc'Clure, poetry also flows through body and spirit, coinciding with the Amerindians in that words are physical objects that surround us, with their particular presence. When Margaret Astrov analyzes this in her book *American Indian Prose and Poetry* she points to how words hold power as independent objects –«the word has form and substance, being independent of the mind or the voice, a palpable existence, a life of its own»(26). Reading Mc'Clure, is to find the keys to what Astrov is saying, since words appear in his poems as cells in a

living organism. It is true that words and poem emanate from the author, but we make it ours constantly, even on re-reading it seems to have acquired a new configuration or presence. Language cannot be a mechanical instrument for the Native Americans or for this poet, nor can a poem be a fixed form, as such they take on their own presence and participate in the tangible world alongside us.

Conscious of this, Mc'Clure sought to find a new physical expression of language, to channel greater attention towards it (through the surprise caused by its novel form), and similarly, greater connection of this language with our beast or mammal nature. This new language emanated from the body and could be defined as «beast-language» since it resembles many guttural animal sounds and their a-rational character. This might be said to be one of the most original aspects of Mc'Clure's poetry, best exemplified in *Ghost Tantras*. The cover itself bears the image of a lion-man and the poem as a whole reproduces the surroundings and silence of which speaks the «beast» or human being in its most primal state. Together with this the title also gives sufficient indications that the poet is more interested in vibrating with the universe than seeking exact correspondences between words and everyday reality.

The anti-conventionality of *Ghost Tantras* may seem funny to us nowadays when compared to the American experimental poetry of the 80's, but it is true that the vocabulary used is not precise and debate exists about the interplay between its decipherability and non-referentiality. The key word in these poems is «tantra,» and this demands greater participation from the reader. Silent mental reading is not enough, as the text must be experienced physically, taking it into our bodies as if it were our own. The tantric moment is when that vibration is produced in the reader's larynx which finally stimulates their body and mind, «don't worry about details, let individual pronunciations and vibrations occur and don't look for secret meanings. Read them aloud» (*GT* back cover). It is clear that Mc'Clure is not interested in the conventional correspondence of words to reality or even words to meaning, but rather in the «tantra» of exploring the human body as sound producing device. As I pointed out earlier, they are not to be read mentally, as they are sounds that exist in the larynx, producing echoes, vibrations and resonances perceptible only when experienced orally. Here is an example:

MAKE LOVE SOUNDS.

HERE SMELL.

Grahh pallid! Graaah love nowhr
 bwooooooooooh stahr zaboth nwooooo
 Saba-grooooooh nooo-boooooooh! (*GT* 13)

Jerome Rothenberg is another poet of the sixties whose poetry readings are also typically unique performances as regards the unrepeatability of the oral experience he communicates. Avidly interested in Native-American poetry, Rothenberg has attempted on numerous occasions a «total translation» of his poems, transcribing phonetically the distortion of unclassifiable words and sounds. Although these efforts have seen the light of day in the anthologies *Shaking the Pump* and *America a*

Prophecy, he admits himself to be dissatisfied inasmuch as the Native-American poems have two «untranslatable» qualities, namely: they are participatory events and are intrinsically oral. Many of these poems translated by Rothenberg resemble those of Mc'Clure, but the latter's appear on printed pages to be pronounced by an individual not the collectivity. They are only complete once uttered by the body.

The poems in *Ghost Tantras* appear in their most authentic form as howls of the «beast-man.» These are highly individual poems that emit natural sounds interpretable as sounds of freedom, liberation and animal sensuality that ultimately if read one by one, are aimed at making us conscious of being mammals before being arrogant humans. Noam Chomsky holds that certain innate factors determine human nature, some of which are related with morality, others our social roles and some incline us towards some aesthetic preference or other. The human body, in his view, holds internal programming that explains how grammatical structures are in a general way common to all languages and therefore embody fundamental properties of the human mind –«there are, then certain language universals that set limits to the variety of human language» (10). If this is true, Mc'Clure radicalizes these limits and questions the frontier separating human from animal. Thus experimenting with words, swinging between primitive language, with which in theory we begin to be human beings, and the exploration of tantric body-levels he leads us into, is a «new» poetic mode revealing this poet's urge to integrate man and nature, beginning from within the human body. The following verses are a good example of such poetry:

HOOO-OOOOOOOO-OOOOL HROHH
 GRAH! GRAH! GRAHH! GREER! NORT
 aiiee swed nort by noth tone be lonet.
 THOH!
 You are here this is my body groor. (GT 31)

The most genuine Mc'Clurian beast language is, as we can see, a combination of conventional-assertive language and guttural sounds arising from our most primitive nature. Behind this apparently naive, provocative language, underlies a poetry that obliges us to reflect on the role of words, on the approach of the self to them and eventually to reality itself. The relevance of this mode of poetry-making is rooted in the poet allowing us to glimpse his urge to experiment rather than imitate, showing us the a-rational in us, seeking and testing emotions rather than reasonings. On seeking these emotions or transferring them to the page in the purest way possible, it becomes obvious the poet is not pursuing any definite form. Also, that the shapes taken by his beast-language are there to make us aware of returning to our most primal state to explore and become conscious of our own body. This perspective was indeed novel in the American poetry of the 60's and seems the consequence of an earlier period, where this poet also experimented with hallucinogens, especially peyote (e.g. in *Hymns to St. Geryon and Other Poems*); with the aim of expanding consciousness and achieving a sense of union with oneself and others. The visionary writer Alan Watts described this drug-induced identity unit as similar to the sensitivity that allows

a flock of birds to be seen to merge into one body (86). However, in the second half of the sixties the transformation of consciousness pursued by Mc'Clure is not a result of his drug experiences, but rather his desire to listen to his inner energy, sometimes called religious experience, aimed at becoming one with the universe. Robert Duncan describes the spirit of this «new» poetry exactly, it appears the only possible medium to express this language which envisages such fusion with the natural world: «Soul is the body's dream or its continuity in eternity -a wraith of mind. Poetry is the very life of the soul: the body's discovery that it can dream. And perish into its own imagination.»⁴ The word «tantric» used by Mc'Clure in these poems is his physical contact with nature and of course a biological exercise aimed at transcendence. The tantra emerging from inside the body projects soul through forms arising continually as a kind of ritual.

We cannot forget that Mc'Clure's standpoint rather contrasts with the post-structuralist ideas of the time. If this American author emphasized the idea of union and integration of the self with our natural surroundings and identification with other mammalian or animal beings, Roland Barthes for example seeks to maintain the separation of author and text, for him, the pleasure of the text is that moment in which one's body begins to follow its own ideas -since one's body does not have the same ideas (26). For Mc'Clure, the body is a primary unit of one's own self through which to search for solutions and is the ideal medium to explore and experience the depths of our hidden primitive nature. By this, I mean that Mc'Clure does not follow the French intellectual current based on the solemnity of the text in itself, but rather prefers to follow the direction taken by the spirit of the late sixties, opposition to world capitalism and attraction to spiritual values, especially those derived from oriental philosophies. Indeed, he had begun to introduce his books with the thoughts of famous ecologists. *Rare Angel* begins with a quote by H.T. Odum, from *Environment, Power and Society*, who lays emphasis on the origin of life and its slow evolution, molecule by molecule, which Mc'Clure transforms poetically into the beginning of life's journey, fundamental in his view, towards identification and integration:

ALL STRANGE STRIPPED
 CREATURES SLITHERING
 through the roots
 grin and dance
 TO
 NEW MUSIC
 I am THEY or THEM. (RA 13)

4. Robert Duncan is quoted here by Ihab Hassan in *Contemporary American Literature* 116. The reference is rather suggestive of the direction taken by American poetry in the second half of the sixties after experiencing psychedelia at the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties. With this he means that the inclusion of poetry and the transcendent as forms of consciousness are to be taken not as opposition to ideology, mundanity and institutionalization, but rather as a way of fusion with nature, parallel to the new ecological awareness becoming popular in the seventies.

If we examine this poem, the capitals are applied to the most relevant: to «it,» to a new music or to all strange creatures, but the basic element is to describe them. His language involves powerful sounds, animal roars, reverberations, lines and verses that play with what he wishes to underline, with everything functioning as a vehicle for the body:

The gestures we make are
our clothing...
... I love my body my face only
first and then others'.
To fill out a vision until I become
one with it.(HSG 18)

The reply offered by this poet to an ideological system permitting so many social and economic contradictions (let us not forget the then ongoing Viet-Nam war and the growing controversy over it), is to gain greater knowledge of the human body's potentialities and greater involvement in the harmony of nature. From this point of view, his poetry formulates essential questions and offers language attached, in principle, to the primitive in us, but from the resultant simplification also providing answers to re-cognize ourselves:

I AM A CAVE
I
ACT
WITHIN!!! (HTWP n. pag.)

This beast-language, standing out with capitals etc., combines guttural sounds with vital statements and invites us to renewed perceptions. It reveals two factors that make it enormously stimulating. Firstly, with his desire to actually adapt it to the body he makes us see language as physical action, and consider size, distance, jumps and relationships in a revealing «tour de force.» In other essays I have already analyzed the correspondence between this posture and that of the abstract expressionists like Pollock and Kline, with their «action painting.» Especially notable is Mc'Clure's desire to invest the poem as art-form with a gestural, organic configuration, to insert multiple points of attention and that the words discuss the evolution of mankind. These aspects run parallel to the gestural forms Pollock and Kline tried to achieve in their paintings and where gesture and action carried with them both intimate personal experience and its sublimation.

Secondly, words or language appear as a historical resource for continuity and make an existential statement. Along with the emotions and physiology described

here, Mc'Clure rigorously states that his spiritual clarity is manifested through his poetry: «YOU WILL ME KNOW BY THE STORIES I TELL!» (RA 122).

Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan were part of a generation just before the «beat poets.» On re-reading Pound and William C. Williams one sees they always defended a dynamic rather than mimetic poetry revolving around the concept of process, initially taken from Alfred N. Whitehead, but later adapted to their idea of following the intuitions, the rhythms of the body and the nearness to experience. Mc'Clure was in contact with those ideas and especially with the kinetics concept Olson develops in «Projective Verse,» of energy transferred from the poet to the poem and afterwards to the reader. Together with this emphasis on energy, the projectivists also developed their concept of «field composition,» where for Olson a poem becomes the field of action where the vitality of a poet is glimpsed and where he or she «has to behave, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined.» (Olson 52). As we can appreciate, all these ideas can be found in Mc'Clure's poetry, i.e. energy from the body, and poetry as a place of discovery where the outflowing language should be vigorous, natural, and be able to provide some understanding of what we really are. It furthermore concords with the weight of gesture and action already noted in Pollock, Kline, etc. This type of poetry, emitting immediate emotions and «physiology» is written in as reduced, direct and emotive a manner as possible:

LET OUR SPEECHES DRIP IN THE AIR
& HANG LIKE SPIKED & FLOWING
FREE PATTERNS

from our warm bodies
while we make our gestures there beneath. (TM 7)

The social, literary and artistic context that nourished Michael Mc'Clure explains the need he felt to devise a new language. His concern being to express the raw emotions inaccessible to reason, he chose a form of expression that is a physical and mental extension of the body, as opposed to a language respiring mere conventionality and conformism. His provocative beast-language is the result of a fascination for action rather than reflection on experience. This poet's career has been coherent in my opinion if his experiences with mescaline and peyote during the 50's are interpreted as part of the urge to expand one's self-knowledge. Although we must also acknowledge that this fact shows him as prototype of the counterculture of that period, he was truly interested in developing his awareness and wished to get to know his limits. What is more, we might say that this is fundamental to an understanding of his last phase in the late seventies, definitely related to his interest in biology and neurology. Consequently his body poetry generates a new awareness, he wishes to convey to us how the world inhales and exhales around him, being part of a biological ritual. Mc'Clure's poetry transmits emotions, vigour, mysterious sounds, it makes us play with words but also points towards a poetry with new ideas, where the writer wishes to break through the conventional limits of language so we can react against

predetermined formalities. His final invitation is but a restatement of the need to take part in, personalize and re-create the world of energy pervading everything:

THERE'S A UNIVERSE in there and magic music to go
with it! Oh, Wowee! It's really beautiful, man!
Oh, Heaven! Heaven! (GC 76)

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