

Mysterioso and Other Poems by Michael McClure. NY: New Directions, 2010.
\$15.95

Reviewed by Tom Pynn

Idiots, trying to get out of the threefold world!

Where will you go?

--Lin-Chi (d. 866)

Lin Chi's comment is directed at those who ignore the phenomenal world of experience in which enlightening practice unfolds and instead seek illusory security and knowledge in words and phrases, tradition, or other cultural artifacts in order to escape from the threefold world of desire, form, and formlessness (Watson 54). For Lin-Chi's form of Ch'an and Buddhism generally, the phenomenal world offers the opportunity to cease the suffering patterns, seen and unseen, that we create for others and ourselves. It is the ultimate practice space. In keeping with this philosophy, far from indulging the dream of escape from our phenomenal situation, Michael McClure has sought a deepening engagement with the body and all the world's creatures.

Since his reading of "For the Death of 100 Whales" at the 6 Gallery reading in 1955, McClure has maintained a committed stance toward this threefold world. "My poetry is to make myself conscious," he has stated, but this doesn't mean he views his art as a purely expressionistic act. He continues rehearsing Shelley's dictum that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of their times" and so has aligned himself "with a movement or a thread or a stream or a surge of individuals who are interested in liberation of the body, in the liberation of the imagination and the liberation of consciousness" (McClure 6-7). The above imagery of ACTION is not incidental. McClure's recovery of embodiment, of linking mind-body-consciousness—MEAT—conjoins poetry and biology: "It's moving in the direction of recovering the biological self" (10).

“Our unending war against nature is the crisis from which I write,” McClure writes in the “Author’s Introduction” to his latest volume of poems, echoing Mallarmé’s view that poets write from a state of crisis (ix). One aspect of this crisis from which McClure composes is the schizophrenic divide we have created between consciousness and body. Inherited from the Renaissance, this duality now threatens not only our individual and collective sense of self, but also the stability and health of all the planet’s life forms and even the planet itself. Instead of duality, McClure’s poetry has always emphasized interconnections between forms. In the volume’s opening poem, McClure indicates the complex interplay of light and dark, of good and evil, of which all things are made:

I’M BLACK, BLACK IN MY CORE
THOUGH ONE EYE OF LIGHT
peers inside of me. (5)

The same darkness that is in him, however, is also “[t]he blackness inside a salmon / or a root of peyote” (5). Though the poem ends in a frank statement that all things die, this must not be mistaken for fatalism but should be viewed in context of an overriding theme of the collection, that in order to begin healing the self and world we must first admit that the darkness within us is as real as the urge for light. “My shoulders are decency and indecency,” McClure observes, “interpenetrating / like wisdom and compassion” (5). Indeed, one of the striking things about this collection is the overwhelming feeling of love being expressed in a vast majority of the poems. I am even tempted to think of *Mysterioso* as a volume of love poems.

If this *Mysterioso* can be considered love poetry, then it’s love poetry of a Beat kind. Love is found not on the heights of Parnassus or in some dreamlike erotic imagery or fantasy, but in the messy realms of desire and form. For instance, in “Mangos and Plastic” the poet contrasts his life with the great Bengali Rishi and poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941):

My life
is eagles, and cars,
and mountains,
and plastic trash
that scatters cracked
and smiling faces. (9)

It is love poetry that holds contraries together: “the unimagined gleam” of a life each day filled “with smiles and tears / and kisses” and “life eating life . . . / as we float on a sea / of petroleum” (31, 11). It is in this light that the second section of the book, “GRAHRS: WAR POEMS GRAHHR POEMS,” contains work that combines imagery of war and ecocide with wedding poems.

It is in the section titled “DEAR BEING,” “a garland of thirty-seven poems,” that the imagery of interpenetration really stands out. McClure explains that these poems emerge out of two main movements: “repeating opening lines of old poems to begin new poems” and his study of Hua-yen Buddhism. A significant school of Chinese Buddhism founded by Fa-tsang (643-712), Hua-yen emphasizes the interconnectedness or inter-being of all things and their dependence upon one another. Furthermore, and this seems to be important for McClure, all things are in harmony with each other. In the case of the disturbing images of cluster bombs falling on grandfathers walking with their grandchildren in Baghdad or helpless soldiers being bulldozed in trenches, it is a difficult lesson to learn. In such a world, “Everything happens at once, in one time:

azure eyelids of the lizard blink, mynah birds
fly to the roof, and tanks blast children
in concrete bunkers. (84)

While “[t]he concords of greed are being delivered in tanks,” McClure can also write,

Dear Being, I am thrilled

to be with you while the auras and zigzags and flashes
spring from us, and into us, and through us.

Where we are there is no greater density

OF RICHES

than the passing experience,
rippling into nowhere. (101)

That impermanence can yield ecstasy is one of the mysteries of this volume in particular and McClure’s work in general. Yet, this has been characteristic of many of the artists working in post-World War II America. Even in the dark moments of *big sur*, Kerouac could write optimistically that life is safe and will yet turn into that Golden Eternity in which all things are brought into ecstatic light. McClure’s poetry suggests a slightly different view. Not that everything will work out, but that we fail to see that the Golden Eternity is here and now in “the passing experience, / rippling into nowhere” (101). These poems are intimations of inter-being: *buddhavatamsaka*.

Most consistently the double image of form and formless, or emptiness and form as the Heart Sutra avers, is developed in the poems that comprise “Double Moiré.” Dedicated to Francis Crick (1916-2004), Nobel Prize winner in medicine in 1962 for co-founding the double helical structure of DNA, these poems alternate between visible and invisible, double patterns that bring together McClure’s principle interests in desire, flesh, consciousness, protein synthesis and the liberation from all form. The intermingling of form and formless can be read in the following sestet:

RAINBOW AGAINST WHITE—PROJECTED ON BLACK

or a moon-bow of ivory telling the time
that will come to be tangled in roots of cress
in the brook. This canny voiceless whisper
powers all galaxies as the water strider
skims on the Technicolor pool. (126)

Wonder and delight, energy and melody infuse all of the poems in “Double Moiré.” In another poem, the speaker declares that “[w]hen all is alive everything sings the silence” (112).

It’s easy to hear in these poems the music that is always in the background of McClure’s writing. As in the case of performance, he has and continues to bring out the melodic and rhythmic qualities of his lines by collaborating with musicians such as Ray Manzarek, Terry Riley, and Riders on the Storm, a band founded by Manzarek and Doors’ guitarist Robby Krieger. In the current case of “Double Moiré,” if one goes to YouTube and types in “Double Moiré 3rd Movement,” one will find McClure’s performance of these poems and the jazz soundings of George Brook et al. – a delightful experience.

Works Cited

- McClure, Michael. *Lighting the Corners: On Art, Nature, and the Visionary*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.
- Watson, Burton. Translator. *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1999.