

# STEERAGE PRESS

Editor/publisher Kass Fleisher interviews Michael Joyce (September 2018)

**(KF) where did this come from?**

Funny you should ask, because of all my books this is the only one where I cannot remember either a particular moment or a sentence/paragraph that started it off. For almost all my prior novels I have had what I call a tonal segment or a seed crystal, a sentence—not necessarily the first—that I am trying to write toward or from. Instead what comes to mind is an image from my childhood that I've written about elsewhere, in which a babysitter (unusual to recall it as such, since like most Irish working class folk, babysitter meant aunt or cousin, and this may very well have been a teenage girl cousin) lifted me up toward the sky saying that the clouds were ice cream if you could only reach them and then, I think (memory gets strange in your 70's, mine was strange at 20), said something about confetti and magic and how you could get it in New York City, and my being excited because I knew from my mother that my uncle, her brother, was working as a page at the NBC television studios in the city. Even I can see that this is a rather obscure and questionable link between openings in the world and media, but that's what comes to mind. So the boy walking with his mother in the first sentence of the book may have been spawned by this memory.

What's strange, and makes me linger on this first question, is that I cannot find anything in my, admittedly now sporadic, journal entries about the first moment of beginning to write this novel, although there are entries much later along the way. The lack of a first entry, however, may have to do more with another unusual circumstance of this novel, which is the first ever that I shared with Carolyn, giving her pages or even reading aloud, from the first. Although she is my first and best reader and copyeditor, I've never been comfortable sharing a work in progress, always waiting until the first draft was in hand. But this one, begun during spring break of a teaching term in 2015, became something of a serial, almost Dickensian (or as near as I ever could be to Dickensian) presentation to an audience of one, an unfolding that gave me great pleasure

**(KF) how does it expand on, or elaborate on, or [ ], your novel -was-?**

**(MJ)** *Was* is/was a network map, where the network is primarily language, as creole, dream, synaptic short-circuit, echololia, Glossolalia, gibberish, Joycean (James Aloysius) sprach, L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E-ish syntactical complication, and Googlespew web search output (Stuart Moulthrop and his grad students have mischievously and wondrously chased down whole strands of the latter), all of it mapped against the actual world, at least on the seven continents of this orb, a world where code-shifting formerly a restricted linguistic phenomenon has instead become a lingua franca. (My very verbal, witty and brilliant, four and a half year old granddaughter, Talulla, suddenly confronted with her father speaking German during a vacation to Switzerland began to talk gibberish at intervals for as long as

her parents would tolerate it, and still does so with her grandfather, who delights in talking thusly, most recently as we chatted through an inning or two of a rare NY Mets win to the apparent dismay of neighboring fans.) There is no central character, the story, such as there is, is connection and confusion as happy convergence.

*Remedia*, despite the misgivings of a few of the publishers who passed on it before Steerage, has a story, albeit a circuitous and circus-like multi-ringed and recursive one, and it also has a central character, albeit seemingly nameless, who acts less as a ringmaster, the neo-traditional role of practitioners of what has come to be called (alarmingly at least to this one witness) “innovative writing” but instead as a wide-eyed, not to say clueless, observer of spectacles and latterday multimedia mystery plays. While scholars of Spanish literature get rightly incensed that Don Quixote is loosely termed a picaresque novel when the knight is not a rogue but an idealist and a seeker, *Remedia*'s protagonist is in my estimation a picaro in the sense that people consider Quixote (or even Hesse's seeker Siddhartha) to be. His roguishness is a venial yet nonetheless fatal innocence to the extent that he often isn't aware of what he is seeing or being seen as or within and, unlike Quixote but a little like Chauncey Gardiner of *Being There*, his medial predecessor, he doesn't do anything about it, indeed doesn't do anything much, despite being in the midst of historic doings and persons, and despite being told as much by wise women who love him.

In describing the novel for promotional copy (as opposed to this?) I wrote “where that prequel [i.e., *Was*] was fleeting, *Remedia* is grounded, and where each immerses readers in a forest of mirrors, in *Remedia* the mirrors give way to portals. If *Was* presented readers a relay of shifting narrators, *Remedia*'s nameless narrator is a long distance runner looking to find his footing while seeking the bright amidst the bleak.”

**(KF) i'd love to hear about your process—you've put out so many highly complex/complicated novels in a short period of time—how do you make these artifacts? 29 drafts? hail mary pass?**

(MJ) A dangerous question to ask a writing teacher, since (despite abundant research to the contrary that suggests the 29 drafts lead downhill eventually) there is an orthodoxy, perhaps dating to *The Pilgrim's Progress* if not Dante, that says it is virtuous to tread such a path even if it treads a trench into the muck. Me, my drafts often take place within the labyrinthian sinuousness of successive builds of sentence and paragraph. To be sure there are micro shifts and micro fixes and emendations, but for me writing a novel is a pilgrimage in Pico Iyer's sense, as something which “in the mind's eye...is generally a straight line, from here to there (from being lost to being found)...[but which] in practice is more often a circle.” For Iyer “a pilgrim's journey, unlike a traveler's, never ends, it only deepens...travelling deeper into faith and doubt at the same time, deeper into complexity.” That said I am aware that a true pilgrim's progress is sometimes not evident or even transmissible to an ordinary reader and know that my writing has sometimes been rightly faulted on that account. To that I offer my penance of Hail Mary's and Glory Be's.

**(KF) how does your poetry writing inform your novel writing—it is so profoundly present?**

(MJ) I have to smile at this because for forty years or so I wrote only largely formal, occasional, self-involved poems I never sought to publish and only comparatively lately, which is to say a decade-plus or a dozen years ago— perhaps because I entered my seventh decade— had some other register settled in as increasingly (a fugitive from the digital) I was drawn more and more to making poems. I say drawn but it might be better to say pushed, since much of my impetus came from readers and critics, again first of all Carolyn, who repeatedly said of my prose that it ought to be, or was, poems.

All that said, I love your calling it “profoundly present” since that is not far off from what, after all these years, and despite purporting to teach others how to write poetry, is how I would define what poetry does, that is, making the present profound and the profound present.

**(KF) whence the nomadic impulse you’ve pursued—the commedia, the picaresque, the pastoral (psalm 23 really—“i walk through...”), the time travel, the consciousness travel (dream, reality, surreality)? how does it connect to the internet?**

(MJ) I will grant you the apparent innocence of the last demi-punning allusion to internet connection and begin with a parable of boyish innocence. Much in the way that the boy lifted to ice cream clouds was a formative memory, I’ve also written about how as an adolescent I would stand by the screen door on summer nights and gaze out at the street-lit nights and dream of going somewhere other. I did so also in winter looking out on the contours of Buffalo snows and continue to do so now looking out on the Hudson River. I think this is the internet’s inheritance from the book and the book’s from the pantomime or mesmerism of the singer, storyteller, or dancer. That there is a somewhere out there begins with the somewhere within and then reveals itself in layers (or, in the phrase I stole from Carolyn for the book description, in a “millefeuille of scrims, screens, apertures, and lenses”). What’s dangerous, of course, in ours as in any prior time of longing for an otherness, is that it distracts us from being *here*, where we are, in the profound instant. In the earliest days of what is now called the first wave hypertext writers, among the TINAC group of Nancy Kaplan, John McDaid, Stuart Moulthrop and myself, later joined by Carolyn and Jane Yellowlees Douglas, we were fond (at least the cisgender males) of Buckaroo Bonzai’s wise utterance—which a Buckaroo B. fansite attributes to everyone from Buddha to Confucius to Gahan Wilson to Gnarl Barkley— that “No matter where you go, there you are.”

In this wise, the where and the there, the connection for me between the nomadic impulse and the internet may lie in my Irish-American heritage. The late John O’Donohue (who Wiki wonderfully describes as “poet, author, priest, and Hegelian philosopher”) wrote that “The Celtic imagination always sensed that beneath time there was eternal depth. This offers us a completely different way of relating to time. It relieves time of the finality of ending. While something may come to an ending on the surface of time, its presence, meaning, and effect continue to be held into the eternal... therefore, it becomes possible to imagine a realm beyond endings where all that has unfolded is not canceled or lost, but where the spirit-depths of it are already arriving home.” I wrote in a journal once that those housebound moments when I want to go somewhere, want to do something, else or

elsewhere from where I am now, seem to me suddenly a vision of how the moment just before death must be. The inevitable void before me, only me to fill it.

**(KF)** but also the performance aspect—commedia, the oral tales—the rhythmic nature of the language is a textual performance really. he is so often audience and not himself performer—curious. the wandering listener. this connects also to the not-entirely-linear nature of the text (the text goes here, goes there).

(MJ) Exactly. Of course I should not be so surprised that as its publisher, but more importantly as the writer you are, that you understand the paradox of this “wandering listener so often audience and not himself performer.” Still it is, I hope, not something self-evident but rather something the reader discovers in the narrator’s textual performance even if he himself does not quite discover it until the end. Both to the extent that *Remedia* is dystopian— perhaps because it was largely written during the rise of US trumpian fascism— and to the extent (a very large one) that this novel is also a media history of a particular period, 1987-2001, from just before the rise of the internet to just before 9/11, it means to capture the way in which, almost despite ourselves, we have given over not just our memories but our present-tense experience to a sort of helpless passivity. It is a look back from the perspective of a present in which we are pummeled by manufactured visions and trumped-up authoritarian spectacles to a bookended history. *Remedia*’s timeframe falls between the period that Kosinski so presciently prophesied in which passivity descended upon us through rabbit ears, and the period just before *The Apprentice* started running on television.

Richard Powers responds to a question from Jill Owens in her Powells.com interview with him about the loss of focused attention to music or art in general in contemporary media culture, saying “What happens is we cease becoming adventurers and we cease becoming participants and subjects ...we simply become consumers and really good commodity experts. When we have the entire gamut for our consumption, we just go to those things that we like the easiest. And that's the problem.”

*Remedia* is a chronicle of someone fighting with greater or less success against ceasing to become an adventurer. As such it occupies a particular time in (and insists on differentiating between) the history of media and our own history. So when another publisher in passing on the book remarked on “a certain datedness that clashes with the exciting stylistic and conceptual moves” I could not help but feel they had missed the point entirely. What you call “the rhythmic nature of the language [as] a textual performance” and “the not-entirely-linear nature of the text” (perhaps not unsurprising for an unregenerate hypertextualist in Ted Nelson’s sense of hypertext as “more text than text”) are not meant to be the other publisher’s “exciting stylistic and conceptual moves” but rather the stirring of the adventurer’s conscience.

**(KF)** at the same time there is a precise narrator arc that feels progressive (almost marxian). how does this complication work in your view?

(MJ) Although I characterized the landscape of *Remedia* as dystopian, it is I believe a hopeful tale, and yet also not utopian. Rather its mode (and perhaps its complication) is that of the Hindu *advaita* in the sense that the Catholic priest and philosopher Raimon Panikkar defines it as “a-duality” where one “is not individually separate from [the other] nor is it totally identical to it.” This kind of non-dual mimics, or better still prefigures, dialectic, whether Greek or Marxist, that has the effect of moving forward even when it hovers at a still point.

Or— to shift from one incomprehensible mode to another— rather than dialectical the narrative is perhaps recursive, its progressive arc a series of self-summonings where the company of others, the vectors of history, and the portals before him save the narrator from what would otherwise threaten to become an infinite loop. Or it least it seems so at the end.

**(KF) where do you think the novel form is these days/where going? (among other things, the technology actually progresses here.)**

(MJ) Yow. The novel has been accounted dead so long that it lived through the time that zombie novel trended, went viral, and returned to stalking the earth. I’ve lived through the time that we hypertextualists were being told in *The New York Times* by E. Annie Proulx that “Nobody is going to sit down and read a novel on a twitchy little screen. Ever.” to when Simon and Schuster has (an admittedly 37-second) online trailer and Kindle version of her *Barkskins*. I watched with unalloyed joy as the (second-wave) Nouvelle Vague of what the French called *autofiction* swept over what used to be neatly called (and categorized) as “creative non-fiction” and the French word lost the life vest of its italics in the process. Anent the latter, I like the distinction Joanna Biggs made in reviewing my colleague Amitava Kumar’s *Immigrant, Montana* in *The New Yorker* suggesting that there are “two main tendencies in novels that fall between genres: in Lerner-esque and Hetian ‘autofiction,’ the book most often turns in to the self; in the Sebaldian and Colesque nonfiction novel, that turn is frequently toward the world.” *Remedia*, while not an autofiction (although I know from you that Johanna Drucker called it a memoir in the first draft of her blurb) wants, in the mode of *advaita*, to have it both ways.

All of which is to suggest that the novel seems still happily (if twitchily or bewitchedly) as betwixt and between as it was from the start, whether you account that as *The Tale of Genji*, *Don Quixote*, the very English *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Robinson Crusoe*, or *Pamela*. And so, if as some say may soon come to be, AI’s write all new novels and we (or they) read them in AR or VR, it is still the case as it was in 1967 when Italo Calvino wrote in “Cybernetics and Ghosts” that “Writers... are already writing machines, at least they are when all goes well” and so “once we have dismantled and reassembled the process of literary composition, the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading.”

**(KF) why does this seem to you to be your last effort in that form?**

(MJ) Two things Irish-Americans are good at are leaving things behind and lingering goodbyes. It is true, as you know, that I've taken to calling this "my last novel," not out of any fatalist impulses but because I'm not writing at present and no longer certain why I should. Maybe that will pass, but it's not anything I've ever experienced before. I grow old but as yet do not wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled, although dad jeans are another thing (and the grow old allusion seals its own deal). Maybe Prufrock will make a comeback, for as in his era some of my valedictory feeling surely results from the way that the general malaise, the constant pummeling I spoke of before, saps any imagination not to say vision. We are all too weary of the current horror story where an obscene clown face and bulbous twitter-finger mocks Adorno's notion of barbarism and Arendt's banality of evil. Meanwhile the slime oozes from the gutter into the streets of Chemnitz and Charlottesville, the polar caps melt, and the children are torn from their parents and caged. It is hard to think, let alone sing, and the general attack on any sort of truth (constant noise being the center of the struggle in *Remedia*) makes even this complaint sound false to its maker. Beckett's, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." begins to feel too high a standard unless one attempts it in silence.

**(KF) if you want, but it could just be my death-of-the-editor kick, what do you want from an editor/publisher?**

(MJ) I have had the good fortune of having had three extraordinary publisher/editors in my life, Bruce McPherson, Larry Moore, and you, truly. Each of you are caring and careful alike, scrupulous about editing, mindful of design, active in seeking readers and notice even if outflanked and underfunded in a marketplace spiraling out of control, where books are published in the millions and only read in the average by hundreds. To take the kind of care that each of you do in a market where the best you can generally hope for a title is to match that average is saintly. I notice that you have lately come to use the increasingly popular term micropress, which seems to me descriptive not of the scale of business but of the artful (literally) attention to detail of every kind, from edits to cover art, that you bring to the process.