

The Meat Reason of the Last Beat: McClure's Latihan

A man writhing on the floor with his eyes closed, perhaps groaning and twisting in sunlight that pours through a window, may not be the picture you get in your mind in direct connection with a word like REASON. By 1966, the process described here was a true embodiment of reason for a major USAmerican poet associated with the Beat and San Francisco literary movements.

The lying down, writhing, grunting and, as the poet put it, denying himself “nothing that the sinew and tendons and heart and lung request. He has allowed his consciousness to become a blank field” is how Michael McClure describes his experience with a process called latihan kejiwaan, which could be translated from Indonesian as “spiritual training” or “spiritual exercise.” This essay seeks to examine the nature of McClure's Organic¹ process, how he utilizes the word REASON in that 1966 essay and in his 2011 poetry collection *Of Indigo and Saffron: New and Selected Poems*, and how the latihan kejiwaan is likely to engage in a similar manner with the consciousness of an artist, poet or person who has developed an intuitive connection with pure intuition.

Michael McClure was one of the original poets to read at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955, the first reading of the Beat Generation. His

¹ In this essay, I use the words Projective and Organic rather interchangeably. Charles Olson's preferred term was projective. Robert Duncan (McClure's teacher) and Denise Levertov used Organic for a time in the early to mid '60s.

work also has connections to the San Francisco Renaissance and the Black Mountain School of poetry.

The latihan kejiwaan is the practice at the center of the worldwide Subud organization. As a person who was “opened” in Subud in 2004, and who has studied McClure’s work since 1995, I feel particularly suited to the task of finding the symmetries of these dual paths and relating them to McClure’s unique take on spontaneous composition.

In the expanded edition of *Meat Science Essays*, the final essay is entitled “*Reason*.” The essay begins with a description of the Subud latihan kejiwaan, the man writhing on the floor, occasionally growling and:

There is a passage of time but measurement has ceased and there are only the muscles enacting themselves and creating shapes and motions that... have been forbidden in daily life.

Here is an official definition of the practice from the Subud organizational website:

The spiritual practice of Subud, known as the *latihan kedjiwaan*, is the result of a renewed contact with the divine force of life... a natural process that arises within any person who asks for it, taking place at his or her own pace and according to his or her own nature. Sometimes, when we are still and quiet, or in an unusual heightened state of awareness, we can be suddenly aware of this deeper life going on. The process of the latihan reconnects us with something greater than ourselves and keeps this special awareness alive and active... The essence of the latihan is to allow and follow the spontaneous inner movements from within. It involves no instructions...

This has many parallels to the process of McClure’s spontaneous method of composition. Robert Hunter, in the introduction to McClure’s *Three Poems*, suggests

McClure's is a "theoretic bias grounded in specific objectivizing technique" by which [or through which] he "firmly guides words to report objects of experience, however visionary these objects may be." Hunter recognizes that McClure's "conceptual forte is grounded in an informed Zen mode of perception focused at ease within the moment" employing the "Projective method primarily to report movement of... primordial ecstasy in the life of the biological organism, the visions of its biological mind, and its essential animal spirit." Writing projectively since the late '50s, you can see how McClure's is a higher developed intuition resulting in work that has a completely natural flow.

In the "*Reason*" essay, McClure relates how, during latihan, the notion of how long the exercise has been going on arises, but then the practitioner quickly understands it as being not enough time and then "the question recedes." At ease within the moment. McClure's description of latihan is more a *transcription* of his biological mind in motion. In his 1985 book *Specks*, McClure would describe this as mind/body, body-mind.

According to the Subud hierarchy of life forces, this is indeed the best use of one's own "animal nature." The powerful, best less than human force is then in service to the organism's higher self in the process of surrender to what Charles Olson might have called "The Single Intelligence." Robin Blaser used the phrase "spiritual discipline" to describe Jack Spicer's process of dictation, which no doubt shares

common ground with McClure's Projective approach and the fact that Blaser was writing this in a seminal essay entitled "*The Practice of Outside*" gives us additional clues to the parallels between 20th century Open Form (Organic) process and latihan. Engagement of a power source outside or beyond the individual, yet connected. The unbound self is how some might describe it.

In Subud literature, largely taken from talks given by Subud founder Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo, there is a model of seven "life forces" which, if in integrity in the human being, goes from the mineral, to the vegetable, the animal, the human, the divine human, the angelic and finally to the infinite. The latihan practice is designed to reconnect the Subud practitioner with that infinite (divine) energy and it is said to be a cleansing process. It's not a leap to suggest that McClure would have accessed certain realms of consciousness higher than the self (the human level in the Subud model) in his writing practice before 1966 and was able to recognize it when accessing the latihan for the first time in the mid-'60s. Its non-linear and non-dogmatic approach likely appealed to him considering that the Projective process was first described by Olson as a use of speech "where it is least careless--and least logical."

McClure goes on in the essay to point out that "the majesty, the reason is there within, changing and being created... guided by the melodies of truth and honesty." And that the latihan participant "realizes the outer universe is a reflection

of his reason!” This stance-toward-reality has rather potent implications, the best of which being a freedom brought on by taking responsibility for everything in one’s realm.

In the Organic process, there is a reason present. Denise Levertov argued in the essay “*Some Notes on Organic Form*” that approaching the poem organically, “form is never more than a revelation of content.” The content, the shape of the poem, the music, the imagery all become part of a process of reason which the practitioner begins to intuit more deeply with practice. She would call it a “method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake... Such poetry is exploratory.” She wrote her essay about the same time McClure was beginning to experiment with the latihan, 1965.

McClure’s notion of reason continues. He writes “Reason is freedom.” Such is the tangible, subtle and yet palpable form of freedom present if there is a proper relation to the “lower” forces in the Subud model (mineral, vegetable and animal). These forces are to be in service to the divine aspect of the human and to divinity in general. That freedom the latihan enables would be described in Subud parlance as *surrender*. Surrender is the essence of the power of latihan yet in process, during latihan, one always has the sense that there is a balance. One is never in a trance, or out of control. If there is a situation which demands a more subtle approach,

the growling which McClure writes of, or the song, chant or other manifestation of the latihan in the practitioner can be modified. It can be toned down. The human active in the process can modify his or her response to the signals emanating from outside.

McClure goes on to state “At the highest pitch of reason WE CREATE EVENT through synthesis of events that we determine and bring into being.. events that lie in the past need not have to do with the end result of a new creative act or thought put into motion.” Here he’s echoing notions gleaned from Alfred North Whitehead, who felt reality was more clearly understood as occasions of experience. So the act of latihan, very similar to the act of composing in the Projective/Organic manner, is a kind of deep awareness or perception that is what Whitehead would call “Prehension.” It is the organism is going beyond noticing to a state of coexistence (oneness) with the perceived. You can understand it as the difference between gobbling a pizza while watching a football game on TV and experiencing the incision of eyeteeth into the skin of a Pink Lady apple, feeling that first spray of juice on the tongue or the roof of one’s mouth and feeling more juice cascade down the throat as the chewing commences and the apple savors the experience of the human life force.

Such is the awareness of both McClure’s composition method and the process of an engaged latihan. That the practitioner is still capable of thought

during latihan suggests that there are some awarenesses that can come to him or her during the process and this is not at all uncommon, not to mention specific variations on latihan focused on specific questions². Of course there is a language inherent in this act that must be developed by each practitioner to refine literacy and precision. Here we are “recalibrating the mechanism of perception,” in the words of Gary Snyder. This is why I have argued that an Organic approach is an aid to individuation. McClure recognizes this when he states “Reason is a physical process felt kinesthetically by the body.” It’s a use of language as “enactment of being.” When one reads work at this level, it puts more shallow gestures into the proper perspective.

“Reason is the revolt of the senses against regulations that dull them... we move among cliffs and icebergs of chance events coming at us... sidestepping oncoming events can be just as purposeful an act of reason as any other.” Here, McClure continues the notions of Whitehead. He’s describing “negative prehension” or purposefully not engaging with certain things in one’s environment (intelligence). It would be another 25 years from the moment of composition until McClure would embrace sobriety, but you can see here that the seed had been planted.

² In Subud the practice of testing is done on specific questions by members with the assistance of helpers.

One can mine this essay quite extensively and one must experience the work at a level approximating that with which it was composed. This only requires attention, using “the richness of one’s being to have the experience of the poem.” Yet there are a few more points McClure makes which tie in the kinesthetic intelligence developed by the latihan with McClure’s own perception:

“What comes straight in through the senses and combines with imagination without distortion is the concrete reality on which reason is based.”

“Poetry is an act of reason at its highest and most farflung pitch--and is a demonstration of reason.”

Reason may call one to emit a guttural moan, make chopping motions while singing an indigenous melody, chant ALLAH ALLAH ALLAH or JESU CHRISTO JESU CHRISTO JESU CHRISTO over and over. It might require the screaming of obscenities or laughter with hands raised high into the air. It might require whistling or mimicry of cats or birds or wooden flutes. Ours is a culture that prides itself on being very reasonable and yet we destroy our own ecosystems in the name of corporate profit, eviscerate old growth forests for paper production, waste trillions of dollars on pre-emptive wars, bomb wedding parties, and torture human beings. Given this moment in history, it is a tremendous gift that we can indulge ourselves in at least two of the methods that have helped formed the substrate of McClure’s energetic gesture. We may be able to steal a little of his fire to set off on the road maps we can create to negotiate the cliffs and icebergs of

chance to come, real and metaphorical. Reason is also composting, recycling, gardening, volunteering, going off the grid, using mass transit, watching for a newborn's first smile or simply taking time to see the plum blossoms bobbing in another wet April wind. Mindfulness.

The elder McClure would see it as forgoing ferocity for lunch, polishing the stars off his boots, morning kisses on the back of the neck, understanding the body as a gate of liberation, forgetting this is a vigil, "blind seeing," a jellyfish swimming on the powerful wing of its body, black sparks in a baby bird's eye, or even Calvin and Hobbes.

Transcending the shallowness of postmodern culture's irony and surface, McClure's work points the way to a more fully embodied poetics (a cosmology) as antidote to the industry-generated-culture and its life-destroying urges, or as he might say, the dead stepfather emerging from a dream to denounce the dreamer stepping from a waterfall, a forest of glazed horse heads or runes. In short, **BREADTH OF BEING** as he states in the 31st stanza of "*Swirls in Asphalt*" from his 2011 collection of new and selected poems *Of Indigo and Saffron*. Or in stanza 29, the

sweaty sparkle
of the thrills in the darkness
of meat and reason

and sunshine and shadow.
It is inside-out
in the moment
and it makes much
mammalian
REASON
when our bodies
touch in sizeless
pleasure.
There's the smell
of cedar
intermingling
with lavender
into a nonsense scent
holding the masked thoughts
of hummingbirds
at the feeder
and flat black blobs
that dart in the eye.

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Hillman City -
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