Michael McClure
by Rod Phillips

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The author of more than twenty volumes of poetry, over twenty plays, two novels, and three collections of essays, Michael McClure is one of the most prolific and enduring figures to emerge from the Beat movement. As one of the five poets to begin his career at the Six Gallery reading in 1955, the reading which launched the Beat movement, he shares a long and rich history with Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, and many other writers of San Francisco's Beat period.

While McClure first rose to fame as part of the Beat phenomenon, his influence as a writer stretches further, in a career now spanning almost fifty years. Writing in what his friend Gary Snyder calls a "biological / wild / unconscious / fairytale / new / scientific / imagination form" (Real Work 124), Michael McClure has carved out an enduring niche in American literature—and in American environmentalism. From his earliest poems of the 1950s to the present, one of McClure's most persistent themes has been the necessity of acknowledging humanity's place in the natural world. For almost five decades, what Lawrence Ferlinghetti once called "McClure's lush green ideas" (qtd. in McClure, Meat Science Essays 3) have placed him squarely at the intersection of American literary and environmental discourse. His long-standing dedication to environmental themes places him in a tradition in American letters dating back to Henry Thoreau. In his discussion of the Thoreauvian strain in American nature writing, James I.
McClintock places McClure in a lineage of environmentally conscious writers including Joseph Wood Krutch, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey. As an heir to this tradition of writers who have “integrated Thoreauvian Romanticism and twentieth-century ecological biology” (3), McClure has much in common with contemporary nature/environmental writers such as Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, A.R. Ammons, Barry Lopez, Richard Nelson, Ann Zwinger, and Peter Matthiessen (10). Well-versed in the sciences of biology and ecology, McClure has long urged his readers to step out of the narrow, prescribed role of human beings, and to see themselves instead as mammals—or at times, in even more universal terms, as animals, or “creatures of Meat and Spirit” (*Meat Science Essays 44*). According to McClure, only by acknowledging—and revolting against—the complex and often destructive societal trappings that combine to define us as “human,” can we hope to be free, whole, and enlightened. As he writes in his 1982 essay “Mozart and the Apple”: “WHEN A MAN DOES NOT ADMIT THAT HE IS AN ANIMAL, he is less than an animal. Not more but less” (*Scratching the Beat Surface* 115).

Although no book-length study of McClure’s work has yet been written, he has received serious critical attention in the last three decades. The March 1975 issue of the journal *Margins* contained “A Symposium on Michael McClure” featuring commentary, reviews, and essays on the writer from a diverse assemblage including poets Anne Waldman, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson, environmental advocates Sterling Bunnell and Stewart Brand, filmmaker Stan Brakhage, and Nobel prize-winning physicist Francis Crick. Beginning in the 1980s, McClure’s writing became the subject of more scholarly studies. Notable among these early studies are Lee Bartlett’s impressionistic essay on the theme of revolt in McClure’s work, “Meat Science to Wolf Net: Michael McClure’s Poetics of Revolt,” in his fine collection *The Sun is But*

Aside from Bartlett’s brief introductory discussion of McClure as one of a group of “postwar West Coast poets,” none of these critical works has attempted to examine the connections between McClure’s body of work and the American west. The fact that McClure is a writer of international importance, who displays a global—and at times, universal—consciousness, makes it easy to overlook the fact that he is also very much a writer of the American west. As a native of the west, and a key player in one of the region’s most significant literary movements, McClure has long resisted the dominance of the eastern literary establishment, of those who “think that America stops at the banks of the Hudson River” (Personal Interview). As with many other writers of the American west before him, an important aspect of McClure’s work has been to correct and overcome this regional bias and to champion a more inclusive American literature.

McClure is an active participant in a long tradition of writers who have reveled in the landscape and inhabitants—both human and non-human—of the American west. Like his literary and spiritual ancestor, the California poet Robinson Jeffers, who in his 1938 Poem “The Answer” urged readers to love the rich complexity of nature and “not man apart from that,” McClure embraces ecological wholeness—often at the expense of human vanity. Like his
friends and fellow westerners Gary Snyder and Lew Welch, McClure is often concerned with intimate knowledge of the Pacific Coast bioregion as “place,” as in poems such as “Point Lobos: Animism,” from his 1959 collection *Hymns to St. Geryon,* “A Spirit of Mount Tamalpais,” contained in *September Blackberries* (1974), and “Haiku Edge,” from *Rain Mirror* (1999). Works such as McClure’s plays *The Blossom or Billy the Kid* (1964), and *The Beard* (1965), which feature characters drawn from the old west—such as gunfighter Billy the Kid—and the new west of Hollywood—such as actress Jean Harlow—point out that the writer’s fascination with the region goes well beyond the close focus on the ecological aspects of place evidenced in much of Snyder’s work. Such works transcend the physical characteristics of the west as a literary subject, and encompass the broader social, historical, and mythological themes of the region, especially those concerned with violence and environmental degradation.

McClure was born 20 October 1932 in Marysville, Kansas, to Thomas and Marian Dixie Johnston McClure. When he was five years old, his parents divorced, and McClure was sent to live with his maternal grandfather Ellis Johnston in Seattle, Washington. Johnston was a physician and an amateur naturalist who in his spare time raised finches and dahlias, and under his roof McClure garnered an enduring respect for the natural world. The young boy spent countless hours roaming the beaches and forests of the Pacific Northwest before returning to Kansas at age twelve, following his mother’s second marriage.

Even as a very young teenager, McClure read broadly in literature and philosophy, devouring volumes by Emanuel Swedenborg, Charles Baudelaire, William Blake, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, and Rainer Maria Rilke. By the age of fourteen, he was already beginning to compose poems of his own, mostly in free verse, but soon, under the
influence of Blake, John Milton, and William Butler Yeats, McClure would undertake a poetic apprenticeship that involved teaching himself to write sonnets, sestinas, and villanelles through close study of these traditional poetic forms.

McClure's first student efforts as a poet reflected his experimentation with traditional form. In 1951, he enrolled at the University of Wichita, where he produced his first serious literary effort, a small collection of villanelles. Despite this and other brief forays into formalistic verse, most of his poetry during this period was written in a pictographic, free-form style.

It was during his time at the University of Wichita that McClure developed a strong interest in abstract expressionist painting. Spurred by his childhood friend Bruce Conner, McClure became intrigued by abstract expressionist paintings by revolutionary new artists such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko. In their art, McClure found and admired a raw physicality which seemed to join body and spirit—the ability of these artists, as he later phrased it, to "write their biographies in the movements of their body on a canvas" (Meltzer 247). This new "action painting" would become a key influence on the young writer's developing aesthetic.

After two years at the University of Wichita, McClure transferred to the University of Arizona in 1953. There, he met and began a relationship with fellow student Joanna Kinnison, the daughter of an Arizona rancher, who shared McClure's keen interest in the jazz of Thelonious Monk and the writings of Federico García Lorca. He gravitated westward, following Kinnison, to San Francisco in 1954, where he planned to enroll in painting classes with Still and Rothko during his senior year at the San Francisco Art Institute.

McClure arrived in San Francisco at a moment ripe with artistic and literary activity. In the immediate post-war years, a cluster of
new poetic voices had taken root there, many of them drawn to the region by their common affinity for the work of California poet Robinson Jeffers. Among the writers comprising what William Everson called this new “San Francisco movement” (Archetype West 109) were Everson himself, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, Jack Spicer, Thomas Parkinson, Richard Moore, and James Boughton. Running counter to the rigid east-coast literary establishment, this new group of California poets tended toward a relaxed bohemian lifestyle and favored a political position of anarchism and pacifism in response to the emerging military industrial-complex. More importantly, in the era of the stilted New Criticism, they produced a decidedly non-academic body of writing that was intensely personal, prophetic, and eager to break free of literary and social constraints.

When he arrived in San Francisco in 1954, McClure was disappointed to find that both Still and Rothko had left the Art Institute during the previous year. In place of courses in abstract expressionist painting, McClure soon found himself enrolled in a writing workshop at San Francisco State University with a poet who would be a mentor and an inspiration to many of the Bay Area’s new voices, the figure whom Everson has called “the chief poet of the San Francisco movement” (109), Robert Duncan.

Duncan’s writing workshop was a life-changing event for the young poet, but Duncan was puzzled by McClure’s insistence on presenting him with his earlier poems written in formal verse. Although McClure’s poetry moved quickly through this brief formalist phase and back to free verse, his first published poems, which appeared in the nation’s most prestigious literary journal, Poetry, when McClure was only twenty-three, are two villanelles dedicated to Theodore Roethke, one of McClure’s favorite poets at the time. Despite the rigid formalism of these early poems, they evidence a strong desire on the poet’s part to experience the world
McClure’s student/teacher relationship with Duncan led to friendship between the two, which, in turn, led to associations with others in the San Francisco poetry community and the rapidly emerging Beat movement. Following his marriage to Joanna Kinnison in 1955, the couple moved into a flat in San Francisco; their daughter Katherine would be born the following year. It was during this time that McClure moved into the literary and artistic orbit surrounding poet Kenneth Rexroth, the elder statesman of the San Francisco poetry community. In the months that followed, he was introduced to dozens of writers and artists who would soon be associated with the Beat movement, including poet Kenneth Patchen, painter Jess Collins, and the mystic-surrealist poet Philip Lamantia.

In early 1955, McClure met poet Allen Ginsberg at a party given by Ruth Witt-Diamant in honor of visiting poet W.H. Auden. The two began a friendship, and Ginsberg read McClure letters that he was receiving from his friend Jack Kerouac, who was spending the year writing in Mexico City. McClure had been asked to organize a poetry reading at a local art gallery but found himself too busy to plan the event, and he gratefully turned the organization of the reading over to Ginsberg.

The skin and wingless skull I wear grow tight.
The echoes from the sky are never clear.
My bones ascend by arsenics of sight.
Beginning in the heart, I work towards light. ("2 for theodore roethke" 218)
The event was the now-famous Six Gallery reading— the foundation of what would soon be called the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, and the beginning of McClure’s public recognition as a writer. Here, in an auto repair shop recently converted into an art gallery, McClure, along with Philip Lamantia, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Allen Ginsberg, helped to launch the Beat movement, and his presence at the event helped to instill in the fledgling movement his life-long fascination with the natural world. The Six Gallery event was McClure’s first public reading, and the poems which he selected to read are thematically and stylistically representative of his early work. They include “For The Death of 100 Whales,” a powerful poem which condemns the slaughter of a pod of Icelandic killer whales by the U.S. military; “Poem,” a fast-moving impressionistic lyric that explores the link between consciousness and nature; and the brief nocturne “Night Words: The Ravishing.” Finally, McClure read “Point Lobos: Animism,” a poem set on the northern California coast, which provides an early glimpse of what the poet would later refer to as the visceral “undersoul” through which all of nature is united. As McClure would later note, the Six Gallery reading was a major turning point—both for himself and for the fledgling group of writers who would soon be known as the Beat movement:

[W]e had gone beyond a point of no return—and we were ready for it, for a point of no return. None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellective void—to the land without poetry—to the spiritual drabness. We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it as we went into it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision. (Scratching 13)

In the months following the Six Gallery reading, McClure took an active role in getting this new vision into print. In 1956
McClure's first small collection of poems, *Passage*, was published by Jonathan Williams' Jargon Books series. That same year, along with James Harmon, McClure edited the journal *Ark II / Moby I*, an incarnation of the 1940s San Francisco anarchist journal *Ark*. During its short three-issue run, this influential and innovative journal published writers representing the best of both the Beat movement and the Black Mountain school, including Kerouac, Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Duncan, and Snyder.

For Beat writers like McClure, the late 1950s were a time of sudden fame and explosive media attention. The publication of Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), and the publication, and subsequent obscenity trial, of Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) focused the eyes of the nation on the emergence of the "new" literary movement rooted in San Francisco. In 1957, McClure's work was featured prominently in the special "San Francisco Scene" issue of *Evergreen Review*, and within a few years his writings would also take their rightful place alongside those of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Duncan, and Snyder in Donald Allen's ground-breaking anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*.

Not all of the attention was positive, however. Articles such as Paul O'Neill's 1959 *Life* magazine photo story, "The Only Rebellion Around," disparaged "Mike" McClure, along with Ginsberg, Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and William Burroughs, as leaders of a new "Cult of the Pariah" (115). McClure and the other "sick little bums" of the Beat generation, O'Neil cautioned, aimed to bring down everything that was clean and decent in American life, including "Mom, Dad, Politics, marriage, [...] the Split-Level House, and the clean, or peace-provoking H-bomb" (115). This would be the first of many such attacks on McClure's work in the years to come.

Although the majority of his associates during the 1950s in San Francisco were other poets and painters, among his closest friends
during the period was Sterling Bunnell, a scientist whom McClure terms “a visionary naturalist” (Scratching 11). Bunnell shared McClure’s interest in both nature and consciousness, and the poet credits him as being the person responsible for his first close look into the biological wealth which northern California offered: “With him,” McClure recalls, “I was able to watch coyotes and foxes and weasels and deer, and walk through savannah country, hike through foothills, go over the mountains, and to the seashore and look into tidepools” (Lighting 3).

This renewed fascination with the natural world is evident in McClure’s first major collection of poems, Hymns to Saint Geryon, published by his friend Dave Haselwood’s Auerhahn Press in 1959. The book contained his 1958 “Peyote Poem” which detailed his first experience with the drug. Also included were early poems McClure first read at the Six Gallery in 1955, including “For the Death of 100 Whales,” “The Mystery of the Hunt,” and “Point Lobos: Animism,” which exemplify the writer’s early fascination with the natural world and his application of biology to poetry.

The collection reflects McClure’s maturation as a writer in both form and content, as well as exhibiting his growing interest in biology and nature. The stiff, imposed structures evidenced in the iambic measures of McClure’s brief formalist period give way to innovative projective verse poems that are centered on the page, a form which quickly became a recognizable trademark of McClure’s poetry. By moving away from the blocky stanza, anchored to the left margin, and moving his lines to the center of the page, McClure aimed to represent in his poetry the symmetrical forms found in the natural world. Visually, his poems came to resemble strands of DNA, whirlpools, blossoms, and, according to the poet, “the lengthwise symmetry found in higher animals” (Rebel Lions vii).
Another recognizable trademark of McClure's poetry, the abundant use of capital letters, is also in evidence in these early poems from *Hymns to Saint Geryon*. Never intended to add emphasis to the words they are applied to, the lines containing capital letters are inserted, McClure has noted, to act as a "[...] disruption of the allure of the poem and a reminder that it was a made thing. The capitals worked on one hand to distance the reader for a moment and, on the other, to create an attractive disruption in an otherwise flowing experience" (*Rebel Lions* vii).

The collection's title poem presented readers with a theme that would echo through McClure's work for decades: the need to rejoin the divided self and attain wholeness. Using the image of Geryon, Dante's beast of duplicity, who bore a handsome face joined to a dragon's body, McClure decries the human condition in which mind is divorced from body, spirit from flesh, man from animal. "Hymn to St. Geryon" attempts to bridge this gap between the social facade of human culture and instinctual desires of the body, which McClure would later refer to as the "biological self." As McClure notes in the poem, "Even Geryon (as Geryon) is beautiful but not if you look / only at the head or body" (*Hymns* 20).

The poem attempts to make readers aware of the possibility of reunifying the cerebral and physical aspects of their beings—the head and the body. Such a unified subject becomes what McClure refers to as "THE SELFS [sic] FREE HERO," in the company of such enlightened and heroic figures as Henry Thoreau, D.H. Lawrence, William Blake, Francisco Goya, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline (19). For McClure and these other artists who had been able to reunify the Cartesian split between mind and body, the process of producing art—traditionally seen as high-level mental activity—becomes instead an animal's natural physical gesture: "I am the body, the animal," he writes, "the poem / is a gesture of mine" (22).
Often, the poetic work of reunifying mind and body is accomplished by means of a close microbiological perspective which forces us to view ourselves in relation to “lower” forms of life, as in the poem entitled “Canticle.” In it, the poet explores the lives of “amphioxus, rotifers,” and “arrow-worms”—simple multi-celled aquatic creatures whom he deems “our guts [sic] cousins” (*Hymns* 24-25). Such an acknowledgment of his role as fellow creature and “cousin” to microscopic organisms allows the poet to reclaim his own biological identity. Like many of the poems in *Hymns to Saint Geryon*, “Canticle” yearns for a biological wholeness, or what McClure has called “the monism of nature,” exemplified by both the ancient Taoist view of the universe as a single uncarved block, and by modern scientific theories of ecology, such as those posited by Alfred North Whitehead and Ernst Haekel (*Scratching* 27). Under such a view, the “amphioxus, rotifers,” and “arrow-worms” are not “lower” forms of life, but are, instead, valuable and even divine expressions of a common life force.

A similar microbiological perspective informs McClure’s essay “Revolt,” first published in 1961 in *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, a publication McClure co-edited with poets David Meltzer and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Decidedly more political in its intent than *Ark II / Moby I*, the journal published an impressive array of writers and philosophers and hoped to create what the editor’s statement called “an open space where normally apolitical men may speak uncensored upon any subject they feel most hotly & coolly about in a world which politics has made” (1:3). In addition to writers from the Beat circle such as Ginsberg, Snyder, Gregory Corso, and William Burroughs, contributors to the first issue included such luminaries as Thomas Merton, Bertrand Russell, Albert Camus, Robert Duncan, and Norman Mailer.

McClure’s “Revolt” extends the writer’s use of microbiological imagery, first seen in the poem “Canticle,” to discuss personal,
philosophical, and political issues facing humans. In the essay, McClure uses the planarian worm, a species of “small flat black worms with triangular heads,” as a biological example of revolt (38). Since they are bilaterally symmetrical (like most higher mammals), possess simple nervous systems as well as eyes, and utilize a simple process of digestion, McClure calls them “our farthest close-cousins” (39). Living as they do, in “a simpler universe of clearer beauty and simpler Good and Bad” (41), the tiny creatures become useful to McClure as reflections of the human condition.

The author finds in these small worms a “basic relevant meaning of revolt to us as many-celled meat-creatures,” since the planarian worm has the ability to “revolt” through asexual reproduction by dividing its head from its body and forming two new beings (38). Humans, unable to simply split in half when the mind and body are in discord, must choose other methods of revolt to maintain the equilibrium between the high-powered forces of the human intellect and the often ignored and under-developed “subspirits” of the body. Too often in humans, McClure notes, “The Head is Chief and the Body follows” (40). But for McClure, the human form can only be seen as complete when viewed as a whole composed of both head and body; the “revolt” of the physical side of one’s nature—the biological self—in opposition to the powerful forces of the mind—the social or political self—is an ongoing part of this quest for equilibrium: “At all times revolt is the search for health and naturality. Revolt is a desire to experience normal physiological processes that give pleasure of fullness and expansion” (40).

McClure’s poetry of the period reflects this embrace of revolt as an act of self-realization and creative expansion. His 1961 collection The New Book / A Book of Torture chronicles the poet’s often dark, visionary explorations with the psychoactive drug peyote. In it, McClure pays homage to one of his heroes with the poem “Ode
to Jackson Pollock.” The poem directly addresses the recently deceased painter, drawing a close parallel between the works of the poet and the visual artist, giving voice to the aesthetic linkage that McClure had first felt with the radical action painting of the abstract expressionists during his college years. In both the process of writing and the act of painting, the body of the artist manifests the mind’s landscape: “Our sorrows / before us. Copy them in air! We / make their postures with our stance” (New Book 9).

Published in 1961, the same year as The New Book, McClure’s Dark Brown is his first book-length poem. Containing the long title poem as well as two graphically erotic codas, “Fuck Ode” and “Garland,” Dark Brown had difficulty finding a publisher due to its outspoken sexuality. If The New Book represented McClure’s struggles with the dark peyote visions of “HELL PAIN BEWILDERED EMPTINESS” (New Book 7), Dark Brown seems to offer what William King has called “a psychic restructuring” (388) through which the poet discovers a unifying force in nature. This force, which McClure refers to as Odem—a German word for the spirit of beasts—or the Undersoul, is the visceral bond which ties together all forms of life. Reminiscent of Emerson’s transcendentalist concept of the “Over-Soul,” McClure’s undersoul provides a vision of clarity and unity in a chaotic universe: “Unclouded one. / Undersoul. Odem, Dark brown, Umber, Beast. / The undersoul a star!” (Dark Brown n.p.).

McClure’s poetry can often be difficult and even obscure, and the poet has at times adopted the abstract expressionist painter Clyfford Still’s dictum that in art “Demands for communication are presumptuous and irrelevant” (Scratching 26). Always present—yet not always easily decipherable—in his early poetry, McClure’s aesthetic and ecological precepts are first clearly described in his 1963 collection, Meat Science Essays. The eight essays contained in this slim volume cover a diverse range of subjects—from vivid
descriptions of the author's early experiments with mind-altering drugs to essays in response to the French surrealist Antonin Artaud and the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus. But a common thread which finds its way into each of the essays, as the book's title indicates, is the notion of a shared biological connection among all creatures, human and non-human: "that all," as McClure notes, "are finally creatures of Meat and Spirit" (44).

Asking enthusiastically, "What greater thing is there than to fill out the fullness of being a mammal?" (82), McClure admonishes his readers to reconsider their place in the world, and their relationship to the rest of nature. "LET US THROW OUT THE WORD MAN!," he urges, and seek in place of this limited role the "mammalian possibility" of "a larger place"—a taxonomic broadening from the single species Homo sapiens to full membership among the more than four thousand species of the class Mammalia (79-80).

One of the key inspirations for this new mammalian vision was the use of drugs. Experimentation with hallucinogenic substances was an important source for McClure's evolving aesthetic vision, as it was for many other Beat-era writers and artists. The Meat Science Essays contain several pieces detailing McClure's use of peyote, heroin, cocaine, and the hallucinogenic psilocybin mushroom. Although the author has in recent times cited drugs as being merely one source among many other influences on his thought and writing, McClure's essay "Drug Notes" provides an insight into the central importance which his drug experimentation played in shaping his view of the universe. McClure himself seems to acknowledge the centrality of his drug experimentation by making his first use of peyote the topic of the opening sentence of Scratching the Beat Surface, the book in which he explores the connection between his work and the natural world: "In 1958 I ate the American Indian drug peyote for the first time" (Scratching 5).
McClure notes that at the time “there was a mystery about drugs and they were taken for joy, for consciousness, for spiritual elevation, or for what the Romantic poet Keats called ‘Soul-making’” (5).

The “adventure of consciousness” (6) which McClure entered into with his first experimentation with peyote may well be at the root of the poet’s mammalian vision. In the section on peyote in “Drug Notes,” after noting that “We have learned to see by a code first invented by Michelangelo and Da Vinci,” McClure writes that to experience the world through the drug’s effects “is to know that you’ve lived denying and dimly sensing reality through a haze” (26). When the aesthetic “code” imposed by human culture drops away, the author finds in its place a universe in which “All men are strange beast-animals [. . .] Far underneath the actions they make, their animal actions are still being performed as they walk and smile [. . .]” (26).

McClure’s essay “The Mushroom,” from the same volume, describes another drug experiment into what the author calls the “Olympian universe” into which hallucinogenic substances can offer a window (15). Although he notes that when using psilocybin mushrooms, one feels “utterly human and humane,” McClure finds here, too, a bridge to the non-human world, and an acknowledgment of the “beastliness of mankind” (15). The essay describes a long, mundane afternoon’s simple activities—lunch, a drive, a trip to an art museum—turned into a dazzling and illuminating psychedelic adventure through the use of the mushroom. As he did under the influence of peyote, the poet experiences a vision of the human body apart from the aesthetics of “Michelangelo and Da Vinci,” but rather than viewing humans as “animals,” as he did in the earlier peyote vision, he now views them as far simpler creatures. “All of our notions of the human body’s shape are wrong,” he states:
We think it is a head joined on a torso and sprouting arms and legs and genitals and breasts, but we're wrong. It is more unified than that. It's all one total unity of protoplasm and our ideas of its appearance are too much a matter of habit. (19)

As the Meat Science Essays indicate, by 1963 the writer had already engaged in a decade-long quest for meaning and wholeness in the universe. He had served his apprenticeship as an artist and had taken his place among a handful of Beat writers who had shaken American literature out of the academic conformity of the 1950s. In doing so, he had carved out a poetic voice and created an immediately recognizable style that were his alone. But the middle 1960s were to prove to be an even more creative and innovative period for McClure, as he further stretched the boundaries of his art.

Among the most bizarre and visionary of McClure's literary innovations during this period were his experiments with beast language. McClure had long been intrigued by the utterances of other animals—and the way that human discourse could often be seen in light of the way that other creatures communicate. He sought to create a new language based on the sounds of animals and divorced from normal human discourse, and yet still communicative on some deeper biological level. Beast language is, at its core, yet another of the poet's devices for weaning readers from their human assumptions and societal conventions, a way to bridge the gap between human and animal, between mind and gut. As Gregory Stephenson notes, McClure's beast language consists of "shamanistic invocations, incantations, evocations of the beast spirit, of mammal consciousness" (114). The lexicon of McClure's beast language is varied and indeed expressive in ways that at times surpass more traditional forms of poetic discourse. Ranging from anguished howls to roars of sensual delight and affectionate
purring, the invented vocabulary is at its most effective when read aloud.

McClure had first made use of beast language in 1960 when he had written a brief play, entitled !The Feast!, which was performed at San Francisco’s Batman Gallery, partially in this invented idiom. His most daring experiment with the new language came in the 1964 collection Ghost Tantras. Featuring a cover photograph by Wallace Berman of McClure in half-human/half-beast make-up, the collection includes ninety-nine stanzas written using beast language. In some of the poems, beast language makes up the entirety of the poem; in most cases it is interspersed with normal human speech. The results are a fascinating, if at times unsuccessful, experiment, as in this passage from chorus thirty-nine, dedicated to Marilyn Monroe on the occasion of her death:

I hope you have entered a sacred paradise for full warm bodies, full lips, full hips, and laughing eyes!

AHH GHROOOR! ROOOHR. NOH THAT OHH!

OOOH . . .
Farewell perfect mammal
Fare thee well from thy silken couch and dark day!
AHH GRHHROOOR! AHH ROOOOH. GARR [. . .]

(Ghost Tantras 46)

As Lee Bartlett notes, concerning the collection: “The poet uses language to transcend language, probably a losing proposition” (116). Still, Ghost Tantras represents one of the boldest experiments in twentieth-century literature, ranking with William S. Burroughs’ cut-up texts, Jack Kerouac’s Visions of Cody (1960), and Ed Dorn’s Gunslinger (1968) as a work of visionary innovation. While not as heavily relied upon as in Ghost Tantras, beast language remains as a recurring feature of McClure’s later work, serving as an emphatic device to remind readers of their mammalian connections.
Just as McClure’s *Ghost Tantras* stretched the boundaries of American poetic discourse, his early plays, such as *The Blossom or Billy the Kid* and *The Beard*, challenged the limits of the American theater and quickly established him as one of the most original playwrights of the era. McClure had a strong interest in the theater, especially the plays of William Butler Yeats, John Singe, and Federico Lorca, while still at Wichita. Before he ever read poetry at the Six Gallery, he performed there in a staged reading of *Faust Foutu*, an experimental play written by Robert Duncan. His first attempts at writing a play in 1956 were abortive, however, largely due to his focus on dialogue rather than on the visual aspects of a stage production.

A breakthrough came in 1958, when McClure read French poet and dramatist Antonin Artaud’s recently translated *The Theater and Its Double* and was inspired by Artaud’s ideas. In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud had called for a new form of theater which went far beyond simple stage entertainment. Urging that the traditional dramatic canon be abandoned in favor of new works to be written by poets, he called for an active theater which “releases conflicts, disengages powers, and liberates possibilities” (31). These new works, according to Artaud, should cut through intellectual filtering and social conditioning to engage the audience at the very roots of human experience, thus imbuing the experience of theater with the power and insight of a dream. Noting that “it has not been proved that the language of words is the best possible language” for the stage (107), Artaud envisioned a revitalized form of theatre in which images—in Artaud’s terms, “a language of signs” (107)—would take on far greater importance, and language would become less central, “giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams” (94). In Artaud’s radical ideas, McClure found a kindred spirit and a new direction for his writing for the stage.
Fueled by this new sense of mission, McClure wrote his 1964 play, *The Blossom or Billy the Kid*. The play features nineteenth-century gunfighter Billy the Kid and other participants of New Mexico’s Lincoln County War, Alexander and Susan McSween and John Tunstall, floating together through eternity, unaware of their own deaths, their former struggles, and their relationship to each other. The play’s characters, in the playwright’s words, “speak as if they are mobile and motile sculptures in eternity” (Meltzer 206).

McClure chose the figure of Billy the Kid to act as what he calls “a prophet of death” in the play, marking the first of several appearances in the writer’s work (McAllister 215). The brutality of the outlaw’s actions and the sheer number of murders he commits make him a “preview of the twentieth century” according to the playwright, and a “visionary for the future” (216). The action of the play represents, in McClure’s view, “a kind of compressed Elizabethan revenge tragedy” (McCallister 219) in which McClure’s nemesis, the divided self, is examined. The play’s title character finds himself divided between an impulse toward violent acts of revenge and the pull of love. Although the actions of the young outlaw in avenging John Tunstall’s death may be confused and ill-conceived, in some ways they constitute virtuous acts.

Produced first by Diane di Prima at the Poets’ Theater in New York City in 1964, *The Blossom* was soon performed in a student production at the University of Wisconsin, where it met with censorship from university officials who effectively halted the production because of the play’s graphic dialogue. It was a small hint of more major censorship battles which would plague McClure’s plays for a decade.

It was McClure’s 1965 work *The Beard* which would be seen by censors as his most scandalous play; ironically, it would also be viewed by critics and scholars of American drama as one of the finest works of his career. The play features a second appearance
Their flirtatious dialogue and actions become increasingly violent, and more and more erotically charged. The Kid at first rejects

by Billy the Kid, this time paired with another archetypal American figure, the film sex-goddess Jean Harlow. The play's action consists of an extended dialogue between the two. The title of the play refers to an Elizabethan slang phrase: to "beard" someone or "to pull one's beard" meant to engage in an argument. The couple's heated discussion takes place as they encounter each other in the afterlife—an afterlife, early critic John Lahr noted, not based on a "Christian heaven, but a meatier one" (23).

Seated on a dream-like stage with only two chairs and a table covered with furs, the walls covered in blue velvet, both Harlow and Billy the Kid wear small beards of torn tissue paper to signal their role as spirits in eternity. First seated apart, but then growing physically closer as the play progresses, the pair engages in a verbal sparring match around themes familiar to readers of McClure's poetry: the spiritual depiction of humanity as divine versus the biological view of humanity as "meat," and the power of sexuality to merge the two. Jean Harlow, the Hollywood sex goddess, is the embodiment of all that is beautiful, sexual, and feminine, while Billy the Kid, the wild-west outlaw, embodies violence, physicality, and masculinity. The repetitive, rapid-fire dialogue between the two figures makes up a verbal pas de deux in which both characters flirtatiously size up the other's position. The play's dialogue is stark and terse, providing a realistic grounding to the dream-like setting and a realistic backdrop for the characters' quest for what Harlow describes as "the real me":

HARLOW: Before you can pry any secrets from me, you must first find the real me! Which one will you pursue?
THE KID: What makes you think I want to pry secrets from you?
HARLOW: Because I'm so beautiful. (7)

Their flirtatious dialogue and actions become increasingly violent, and more and more erotically charged. The Kid at first rejects
Harlow's ethereal notion that the beauty of the human body is illusory, and refers to her repeatedly as "a bag of meat" (10). As the play progresses, both characters continue the heated dialogue: part threat, part seduction, part philosophical debate. Echoing each other's words, grudgingly the pair comes to see the truth in the other's viewpoint, gradually acknowledging that both sides—meat and spirit, physical and cerebral, male and female—must ultimately be joined. The play ends with a shocking moment of sexual coupling in which the play's tensions are resolved. As The Kid drops to his knees, his head beneath the raised dress of Harlow, the two opposing forces are ecstatically brought together both physically and spiritually. Harlow's final lines in the play, "STAR! STAR! STAR! [. . .] OH MY GOD! [. . .] BLUE-BLACK STAR! [. . .] STAR! STAR!" (93), signal a joyous transcendence as spirit and meat are finally reconciled.

From its outset, the play was besieged by censors who condemned it for its "obscene" language and the graphic sexuality of the final scene. The Beard was first staged on 8 December 1965 by the San Francisco Actors' Workshop, which agreed to produce the play but then out of concern for its own reputation granted it only a single performance. Next, the play was performed at the Fillmore, the famous rock concert venue, until the San Francisco Police threatened the loss of owner Bill Graham's license if the production continued. Shortly thereafter, following a production of the play in San Francisco at The Committee, a small improvisational comedy theater, lead actors Richard Bright and Billie Dixon were arrested by San Francisco police. Other arrests followed—in Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Vancouver.

Despite the fact that The Beard had won Obie Awards for Rip Taylor as Best Director and for Billie Dixon as Best Actress, a firestorm of often ill-informed controversy followed the production. The Los Angeles Times published two editorials against the play.
before it ever opened in the city. From every angle, McClure recalls, the play was attacked by people he characterizes as "State senators, finks, canaries, musk turtles, [and] karmic debility cases" (Meltzer 212). Actor Charlton Heston spoke out against the play, as did California First Lady Nancy Reagan, and right-wing talk-show host Robert Dornan went so far as to sue McClure for defamation of character after verbally accosting him on opening night in Los Angeles. Legislators in California attempted to pass a bill banning "obscene" plays, a bill that specifically named The Beard, which failed to pass the Criminal Committee by only a single vote.

All in all, nineteen court cases centered around the play, with charges including obscenity, conspiracy to commit a felony, and lewd and dissolute conduct in a public place. Both the American and Canadian Civil Liberties Unions came to The Beard's defense. A brief but highly publicized trial in San Francisco resulted in exoneration for the playwright, and more broadly, for all American plays that dared to challenge the status quo. Just as the trials concerning the alleged obscenity of Allen Ginsberg's Howl and William S. Burroughs' novel Naked Lunch (1959) had broadened the boundaries of what constituted "acceptable" poetry and fiction, McClure's legal ordeal with The Beard did the same for drama, and achieved a lasting victory against the censorship of stage productions.

As his legal battles over The Beard and his earlier work in editing Journal for the Protection of All Beings indicate, McClure is a writer with a keen interest in politics. It must be noted, however, that McClure's political concerns are not those of most Americans of his era, such as the internal power struggle inherent in the American two-party system, or the external battle between Capitalism and Communism culminating in the Cold War. His concerns from the 1950s onward are much more far-reaching than
those which can be addressed by existing political structures. His 1965 anti-Vietnam War poem, *Poisoned Wheat*, is a prime example.

For McClure, politics and ecology are tightly bound together, and any discussion of the poet’s political views—such as his opposition to the war in Vietnam—must be grounded in his ecological worldview. As *Poisoned Wheat* demonstrates, McClure’s mammalian poetics has a radical bio-political component that seeks to demolish political structures as we know them and replace them with a new culture based on biological realities. In *Poisoned Wheat*, we see this struggle between the biological and the political, first explored in the essay “Revolt,” expanded to a global level.

*Poisoned Wheat* is the product of more than a decade of Cold War political angst. Like many of his peers in the Beat circle, McClure looked with horror upon the military buildup of the 1950s. Angered by the necessity to register for the draft during the Korean War, McClure recalls that he and others within the Beat circle felt like political outcasts during the period and were treated like “misplaced canon fodder” (*Scratching* 12). The Cold War missile buildup, war in Korea, and the entanglement in Vietnam combined to heighten McClure’s sense of anxiety about the potential for disaster in Southeast Asia, and as the early sixties progressed, news from the region, such as the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, moved the war to the forefront of his consciousness.

It was a much less well-known event that finally brought the poet fully into the anti-war cause. In early 1965, McClure began to learn of the alarming potential for the use of biological weapons such as defoliants and crop poisons in the Vietnam conflict. The print media of the day was littered with articles with titles such as “What’s So Terrible About Germ Warfare?” which appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. In it, Dr. Clifford Rassweiler urged
Americans to reconsider what he saw as their naïve opposition to chemical and biological weapons and to think “rationally” on the subject. Rassweiler urged the use of agents such as crop poisons to completely destroy North Vietnamese and Cambodian agricultural resources for an entire growing season, thus bringing about the destruction of Communist forces through widespread famine. Articles such as Rassweiler’s moved McClure to respond. He wrote what he calls “a lengthy blast” on the subject in his journals in 1964, a speech which he later shaped into a long poem titled *Poisoned Wheat.*

McClure’s intention in writing the poem seems to have gone far beyond mere artistic expression. From the outset, he envisioned the poem as a means of changing minds on the subject of the Vietnam War. To this end, he and Oyez Press publisher Robert Hawley designed a chapbook containing McClure’s single long poem which would be distributed directly to readers who he felt might have some influence on American policy in Southeast Asia. Together, the two men mailed out six hundred copies of the poem. The document received by those six hundred influential Americans was striking in its appearance and its content. The chapbook’s cover bore the hand-cancelled portrait of Billy the Kid—a figure McClure equated with the American penchant for the glorification of murder and a cultural archetype who loomed large in his plays *The Blossom* and *The Beard.* By canceling the young outlaw’s portrait with two broad brushstrokes, McClure symbolized the end of this fascination with violent death, including its incarnation in Vietnam.

While McClure’s *Poisoned Wheat* did, no doubt, stir some heated discussion concerning the Vietnam War, the greatest importance of the poem may be not its stab at the American war machine but its radical merging of biology and politics. As a poetic manifesto, *Poisoned Wheat* would foreshadow much of McClure’s writing for
the next four decades, as it attempted to look for solutions to the world’s catastrophic problems outside the normal channels of politics and ideology.

From its very beginning, the poem blends the crisis in Southeast Asia with the “forgotten / memory that we are creatures” (Poisoned Wheat 1). Although the poem is rooted in the war in Southeast Asia, the Vietnam conflict quickly becomes just one symptom of a much larger malaise which results when humans cling to what the poet calls the “Structural mechanisms of Society” which “create guilt in the individual” (2) and lead to blind conformity and political allegiance. The poet writes: “Acceptance of guilt for the acts of / entrepreneurs, capitalists and imperialists / smotherers, tricks, and stupefies / the free creature” (2). McClure’s response is to confront and acknowledge these “Structural mechanisms,” and to deny their power in his life. Refusing to cling to what he sees as outmoded and destructive political dogma which ignores biological realities, McClure’s response is to divorce himself from the war and from the misguided and cruel society that wages it: “I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE / FOR THOSE WHO HAVE CREATED / AND / OR CAPTURED the CONTROL DEVICES / OF THE SOCIETY THAT SURROUNDS ME!” (4).

McClure’s hard-line antiwar stance was a radical one in early 1965, a time when opposition to the Vietnam War was still largely smothered beneath Cold War rhetoric. But far more radical is his insistence that we look beyond political rhetoric to the realization that the Vietnam War was not about a political struggle between Communism and Democracy, but was instead symptomatic of a much larger problem to which neither side possessed a solution. McClure’s poem attacks each of the world’s prevailing political systems, in which he sees “a pre-prescribed pattern of guilt leading to escapism and cynicism,” for their failure to effectively address the problems of life on the planet. Arguing that “COMMUNISM WILL
NOT WORK!” and that “CAPITALISM IS FAILURE!” McClure dismisses the ideology of both sides of the Cold War and claims instead his role as an individual, divorced from the governments that wage a war he hates: “I AM INNOCENT AND FREE! / I AM A MAMMAL!” (4-5).

Stating that “I have escaped politics,” and that the “meanings of Marxism and Laissez faire are extinct” (6), the poet rejects the political and social systems which have been artificially imposed upon the biological realities of life. Just as he suggested in his 1961 essay “Revolt” and in Hymns to Saint Geryon, he argues in Poisoned Wheat that the social and intellectual forces of the mind—in this case, the abstract notions of “politics” and “government”—have repressed the biological aspects of human life, often resulting in disastrous consequences. McClure points to the stark biological realities facing the Earth—realities that have gone unaddressed by both Capitalism and Communism: overpopulation, mass starvation, genocide, exploitation of resources, and an increasingly repressive and warlike society. The outcome of this trend is assured, according to McClure, as he envisions a Western civilization already fallen victim to its own suicide.

In place of a culture governed by political dogma, McClure offers what Allen Van Newkirk has called a “bioculture,” in which biology, not political power, is the basis for action. With the poet’s emphatic line, near the end of Poisoned Wheat, declaring that “NEW SOCIETY WILL BE BIOLOGICAL!” (9), and further, that “POLITICS IS DEAD AND BIOLOGY IS HERE!,” McClure demands nothing short of a total reorganization of society along these biocultural lines. Tellingly, the long poem ends, as it began, with an emphatic utterance of McClure’s trademark beast language, a growl symbolizing humanity’s mammalian past—and its mammalian future.
By the middle 1960s, issues like the war in Vietnam had galvanized the nation, and the United States found itself squarely in the middle of a cultural revolution, as legions of young Americans—many of them inspired by the freedom from conformity offered by the Beats a decade earlier—opted out of the mainstream and joined the counterculture. As the youngest member of the San Francisco Beat cadre, and among the most politically active, Michael McClure was a key transitional figure between the Beat movement and the rapidly emerging counterculture of the city’s Haight Ashbury district.

Along with Gary Snyder, Timothy Leary, and Allen Ginsberg, he was one of the leaders of 1967’s Great Human Be-In, the famed “Gathering of Tribes” that drew tens of thousands of hippies to San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park for a day of chanting, music, and revolution, the event which launched the city’s famed “Summer of Love.” In the years that followed, he took an active interest in the political and cultural affairs of the Haight, often associating himself with members of the Diggers, the innovative communal tribe of activists, visionaries, and artists that seemed to best embody the “free” values of the San Francisco counterculture.

McClure took a strong interest in another California counterculture institution as well during this era: the California Hell’s Angels motorcycle club. After meeting Angels member Frank Reynolds at a Bob Dylan concert, he envisioned a book in which the outlaw motorcyclist could tell his own story. The result was Freewheelin’ Frank: Secretary of the Angels, as Told to Michael McClure by Frank Reynolds, published in 1967.

McClure’s influence on the burgeoning counterculture of the 1960s also was augmented by his close friendship and collaboration with rock music luminaries such as Bob Dylan, the finest poet/musician of his generation, and Janis Joplin, with whom he co-wrote Joplin’s classic song “Mercedes Benz.” He was a close
friend of both Jim Morrison and Ray Manzarek of southern California's most notorious rock band, The Doors. In these artists, McClure recognized a timelessness that went far beyond mere popular music, a marriage of music and poetry that hearkened back to the bardic tradition and to the fusion of jazz and poetry by Beat-era writers like Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Jack Kerouac. Just as Rexroth and Ferlinghetti had often shared the stage with jazz musicians in San Francisco clubs like The Blackhawk and The Cellar in the 1950s, a decade later, McClure now found himself on the bill alongside bands such as the Grateful Dead in rock venues such as the Avalon Ballroom.

McClure's deep involvement with the counterculture is evident in his works from the later 1960s onward. Although often preoccupied with the legal squabbles surrounding The Beard, McClure continued to write plays and poetry during the period, including several works of lasting significance. Gargoyle Cartoons, a series of eleven brief comic plays, was first staged in 1969. Featuring animal characters, supernatural beings, mythic themes, exaggerated sexual humor, and moments of disturbing violence, the plays blend poetry, song, dance, beast language, and elements of the courtly masque to create some of the most profound and hilarious moments in modern American theater. The collection of plays, which McClure has deemed "all alike" and "all totally different" (Meltzer 208), was designed to be staged in groups of two to five, "put together," the playwright suggested, "like a bracelet made of an eagle's claw, a jade chip, a bubble, and a tuft of thistledown" (Gargoyle Cartoons, Introduction). Thus, noted the playwright, the director "can make a sculpture out of a theatrical event with any group of plays he chooses" (Meltzer 208).

The first production of the plays from the collection, The Cherub, took place amidst the violent conflict over the fate of People's Park in Berkeley, in which student activists had claimed a small plot of
vacant land owned by the University of California, with the intention of turning it into a “People’s Park.” On 15 May 1969—“Bloody Thursday”—the Berkeley Police and California Highway Patrol stormed the park, injuring over a hundred activists and killing one protestor, James B. Rector, with a round of buckshot.

McClure has said that he favors “the total extension of the mise-en-scène” in order to break from traditional notions of what constitutes the stage space (Meltzer 208). However, neither the playwright nor director John Lion could have predicted the horrific mise-en-scène the audience encountered on their way out of the theater on opening night, as ticket-holders witnessed National Guardsmen, deployed by Governor Ronald Reagan, with bayonets fixed, helicopters laden with tear gas, and police barricades. On the third night of the production McClure’s poem eulogizing the fallen activist, “To James B. Rector,” was distributed as a broadside, and all subsequent performances of the play were dedicated to Rector.

The production that theatergoers witnessed stood in sharp contrast to the events on the streets outside. The Cherub, like all of the plays in Gargoyle Cartoons, relies on dreamlike and, at times, outlandish imagery. Set in a bedroom in which dream and reality blur and solid matter becomes animated, the play parodies Western religion and philosophy, choosing in its place the philosophy “from the dawning East” (199). Bizarre costumes and innovative stage design—such as the brilliantly painted faces of actors popping through walls and ceilings into the stage—along with outlandish dialogue from the disembodied voices of Jesus and Camus, combined to make the play a fanciful contrast to the horrific events unfolding in the Berkeley streets.

Other plays within Gargoyle Cartoons are more directly political and environmentally conscious. Apple Glove features two main characters who are giant garter snakes, offering a non-human’s
view of the universe as the snakes engage in a hilarious platonic dialogue concerning the intricacies of the food chain. This conversation is interrupted, however, as a band of naked human hunters enters the forest, intent on satisfying their hunger with fresh meat. Finding none, the humans begin to devour themselves, amid the gnashing of teeth and cries of “KILL MURDER MEAT . . . SKIN FIRE MEAT POWER . . . DESTROY MEAT EAT” (104), before being driven from the forest by the snakes in a reversal of the Edenic myth. The ecological message of human greed and the capacity for self-destruction, which by 1969 was fast becoming a commonplace, had seldom been presented with such originality, humor, and power.

The most pointed of the plays, Spider Rabbit features a whimsical figure who is half spider and half rabbit, in many ways a darkly comic version of the divided presence of Geryon. Dressed in a fluffy costume and speaking in a smarm, too friendly voice, the title figure proceeds to drink blood, play with hand grenades, and proudly display his autographed copy of Hitler’s Mein Kampf, before gorging himself on a screaming soldier’s brains, all the while repeatedly proclaiming, “I HATE WAR!” (79). The play provides a cartoonish yet stark representation of a duplicitous nation that claims to value peace above all else but is willing to engage in the carpet bombing of Southeast Asia.

Few American writers have fully succeeded in one form, but by the early 1970s McClure had prospered in four: poetry, drama, the essay, and the novel. His first foray into fiction came with his semi-autobiographical novel The Mad Cub, published in 1970 but written several years earlier. An artistic bildungsroman in three parts, the novel follows the development of a brilliant and tormented young poet named Pete—from his wildly experimental college years, through the dark anguish of his early adult period, and finally to a position of freedom and self-acceptance. Written in first
person, as a looping series of non-sequential memories rather than as a linear narrative, *The Mad Cub* details the process of what poet John Keats referred to in his 1819 letter as “Soul-making,” allowing the reader to follow the fitful development of the aspiring artist.

Set in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the early 1950s, the novel’s opening section follows McClure’s protagonist through his college years in a spontaneously written and amazingly frank stream of painful childhood memories, drug experimentation, dreams, and sexual entanglements. As the title indicates, McClure’s core notion that the human is a mammal is central to the novel and to the protagonist’s quest. As the novel begins, Pete is quite literally a “mad cub,” a juvenile being of seemingly limitless potential, but one who is tormented by sexual and emotional longing, self-destructive tendencies, and a penchant for substituting power for love. Thus the potentially energizing experiences described in the book’s early section—late-night jam sessions in Tulsa jazz clubs, myriad drug experiments, and numerous sexual liaisons—rather than being liberating, all simply add to the confusion and self-loathing which the protagonist suffers. Despite the almost overwhelming tone of hopelessness in Pete’s experiences, however, there is a powerful undercurrent of self-reliance within him that allows the protagonist to go on. Though he describes his current existence as “groping about in a long slimy tunnel” (73), he is also aware of an inner, perhaps mammalian, strength: “I know there is something very healthy inside of me and it is struggling to be free and go back to where I came from,” he says. “In the meantime I must bear all of this [...].” (73).

Finally unable to continue with this chaotic and meaningless existence, at the end of the book’s first section the “cub” acknowledges the stumbling blocks in his life and begins to move away from Tulsa and toward his potential as “lion”:
I'm sick of all the things that have held me down and dragged me and disgusted me with life and kept me from ever growing to the point where I might gain ideals. I want to grow and become the lion that I truly am. I'm leaving. (79)

Salvation does not come easily, however, and the novel's second section follows Pete still deeper through what he refers to as "a dark night of the soul" (84)—the same dark period chronicled in the poems contained in The New Book / A Book of Torture. Now twenty-three, living in the "modern jungle" (83) of San Francisco with his wife and their young daughter, the poet finds himself torn between maintaining some sort of stability within his home-life and continuing to pursue his adventure in consciousness through further drug experimentation. By 1956, when the second section of the novel begins, the bebop musicians and pretentious college intellectuals of Pete's days in Tulsa have been replaced with a cast of Beat-era bohemian artists and poets; and perhaps more importantly, the gin, marijuana, and speed of his college days have been replaced by peyote and heroin. The new drugs become the staples of Pete's continuing vision-quest, providing him with both an expansion of consciousness and a nightmare of drug-induced hallucinations. Drugs propel Pete on a dual course, allowing him to experience ecstatic visions while at the same time forcing him to pull away from reality and the love of those closest to him.

In the final analysis, both courses seem instructive, perhaps even necessary, for the development from "mad cub" to a fully mature artist possessing "lion-consciousness" (123). The drug-induced euphoric vision is no less instructive for the young poet than the turmoil that accompanies his self-destructive crash. As in the earlier section of the novel, constant throughout this dark quest is the underlying knowledge that nature can transcend life's apparent
meaninglessness, giving him reason to resist his repeated impulses toward suicide and to go on living:

It begins to occur to me that the whole universe is meaningless—and I force that away and try to reject the thought. I know there are elements of life in it . . . I know we are meant to pass over and be transcendent of the pettiness of all we are doing. I envy the wild beautiful creatures who are not out of place—the shining huge and furious fish in the seas and the wild animals on the tops of mountains waiting to be extinct. (127)

It is this inherent faith in the transcendent undersoul that allows Pete to finally eschew drugs and will himself back into a loving relationship with his wife and daughter. Following a scene of intense psychic pain in which Pete tearfully vows “to regain as much lost sweetness and innocence as I can” (155) by allowing himself the love of his family, he leaps upon a table “growling and imitating an animal and roaring” (154), reasserting his freedom and power as a member of the cosmos. The novel’s third and final section is a brief poem of celebration of this newfound sense of unity. “THE WHIRL OF STARS / ABOUT / THE LION’S HEAD / Are Me” (160), Pete finally asserts, before concluding with a single, all-powerful affirmation: “YES” (165).

The early 1970s were also a pivotal time in the development of McClure’s poetry. It was during this period that the content of McClure’s writing became much more thoroughly anchored in biology, as his psychedelic experiences and his early intuitive feelings of interconnectedness with nature were bolstered by his reading of several scientific theorists, including microbiologist Björn Afzelius, ecologists H.T. Odum and Ramon Margalef, and biophysicist Harold Morowitz. Feeling more certain than ever “that it was no longer appropriate to continue the Descartian division of
mind and physiology" (Scratching 88), McClure turned increasingly to science for support for his intuitions.

During this period, the poet began to view poetry as an “extension of physiology” and further, to consider the possibility “that a poem could even become a living bio-alchemical organism” (Scratching 89). If the Cartesian split between mind and body could be unified, McClure argued, then similarly, a poem could be seen as “an extension” of this unified “Bulk” of the poet’s mind and body: “extensions of myself as much as my hand or arm are extensions of me” (89). Further, McClure began to envision a poem “that like a wolf or salmon could turn its head from side to side to test the elements and seek for breath. I wanted to write a poem that could come to life and be a living organism” (89).

As a way of understanding this “bio-alchemical” transfer of energy between poet and poem, McClure began to investigate the writings of Ramon Margalef, particularly his 1968 work Perspectives in Ecological Theory. Margalef’s writings became “one of the wellsprings of exuberance” in the poet’s thought, allowing McClure a way “to see energy in action in the bundles and bodies that contain it” (Scratching 92-93). Out of his reading of Margalef, McClure began to view his poems as biological extensions born of an “organic process” in which one life form—the poet—transfers energy from “a powerful, complex, informed, ultimately stable substrate”—the poet’s life experience—to create yet another life form: the poem (96). In McClure’s view, poets “develop the containment of complex energy as they mature. They feed from the energy of the substrate around them as it informs their senses. It is an organic process” (96).

Another key scientific influence on McClure's work during the early seventies was Howard T. Odum’s study Environment, Power and Society (1971), a work which shares Margalef’s interest in the manner in which energy functions in nature, and more
importantly, one which sparked the poet’s interest in the notion of biological diversity. In Odum’s scientific text, McClure found ample justification for his earlier feelings of interconnectedness with nature, since Odum’s work often focused on the diverse and inscrutable “species networks” which combine to form what he called “complex systems” representing nature’s “most appealing manifestations of beauty, intricacy, and mystery” (qtd. in Scratching 83). In the mysterious and interwoven fabric of the complex and beautiful systems Odum described, McClure found the scientific support for the intuitive feelings of species interconnectedness with which he had been struggling for more than twenty years. Here was the “uncarved block” of Tao dressed in the garb of Western science—a scientific truth as beautiful and all-encompassing as any peyote vision of the undersoul. All is connected, Odum posited, but the message also carried with it a further caution: all must be connected in order to ensure a healthy and stable environment. No longer was it simply enough to acknowledge humanity’s kinship with nature’s other life-forms, as the poems in Hymns to Saint Geryon did. Odum’s models of ecological systems made it clear to McClure that species were not only interrelated, but also strongly interdependent; the survival of one species—and indeed the entire eco-system—could very well hinge on maintaining the diversity of other species within the system.

The writer’s growing interest in biodiversity was also moving him toward more direct environmental activism. In 1972, McClure traveled to Stockholm, Sweden, along with Gary Snyder, Sterling Bunnell, and Stewart Brand, to attend the United Nations Environmental Conference, an event which McClure covered for Rolling Stone magazine. Although somewhat heartened and energized by the fact that some more radical conference participants were raising issues such as overpopulation, species extinction, and genocide against native peoples, he ultimately found the U.N.
response to the issues totally unsatisfactory in the organization’s attempt merely to stretch the world’s “natural resources” without really addressing the root causes of environmental problems. At the end of his Rolling Stone article on the conference, “The Death of All Flesh,” he railed against a “planetary, one-dimensional society” which comprised “a behemoth conditioned reflex” of environmental destruction (19). “We must find a way to de-condition this societal reflex,” he wrote, in order to provide a “clear sight of the monstrousness” of the problems at hand (19).

McClure’s poetry of the period bristles with the renewed intensity of this mission. His 1974 collection September Blackberries, while featuring a poetic style somewhat more fluid and lyrical than in earlier works, contains a number of pieces which can only be described as biocultural manifestos. “Xes—A Spontaneous Poem” begins with a statement from the poet connecting himself with “the surge” of all life in the universe (7). The action of the long poem is dual. At once McClure actively denies the hold of political and social forces on him as a creature “UNTRAMMELED BY THE NAME OF MAN / and free!” (73) as he embraces the surge of the cosmos: “Why sadness? Why / CONDITIONING? / This is (WE ARE) nature!” (90).

In shorter poems from the collection, such as “A Spirit of Mount Tamalpais,” McClure takes the concept of the individual’s role in the cosmos to a more personal level by paying homage to his friend Lew Welch. A poet who gradually weaned himself from what he called “the world that is man,” Welch had disappeared a few years earlier, after leaving a suicide note and walking into the foothills of the Sierras (196). McClure’s poem, which begins with images of death in the form of “DEER BONES AND FOX SCATS,” contains a lengthy list of the plants, animals, and birds found on a hike up Marin County’s Mount Tamalpais: “Garter snake, Seaside daisy, Grindelia, Coyote bush.” Without embellishing Welch’s
memory, McClure ends the lengthy catalog with the lines, “Bright vision light. Ocean below. Hello, Lew!” (107). In McClure’s view, his friend has entered into the surge of life surrounding the mountain, becoming a palpable presence in the landscape, an equal among the wild iris and the hummingbird, tellingly becoming “a spirit” rather than “the spirit” of Mount Tamalpais.

_Jaguar Skies_, McClure’s 1975 collection, is based largely on the poet’s travels in South America, Africa, and Iceland. The experience of travel allows the poet a larger canvas on which to present his vision of environmental crisis. In poems such as “To a Golden Lion Marmoset: an endangered primate species,” McClure is able to discuss the extinction of a species on a distant continent as a personal loss. Addressing the marmoset, he writes: “Your life is all I find / to prove ours are worthwhile” (3). Further, as the two species are linked in an inscrutable ecological web, the same forces that threaten the seemingly distant marmoset also directly imperil him. The same “monster caterpillars” and “teeth of fire,” he tells the animal, “that eat your jungle / crunch my house” (3).

The collection displays a marked return to rhyme and structure for McClure, with several poems written in the form of sestinas and villanelles, including “Villanelle for Gary Snyder,” written while McClure was in Peru. In it, the poet aligns himself, and supposedly Snyder, with others whom he identifies as revolutionary visionaries, who “GIVE FLESH TO THE REVOLUTION” / “like Che, Darwin, and Francis Crick / creating visions not solution” (68). The list of McClure’s revolutionary compatriots provides an interesting glimpse into the way the poet views his life’s mission. Along with fellow California poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder, McClure finds kinship with Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara, Charles Darwin, author of _Origin of Species_ (1859), and Francis Crick, the Nobel prize-winning scientist who first shed light on the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule. Clearly, it
is a roster which combines the literary, the political, and the scientific—three elements which had comprised much of the poet's work up to that point.

As he had shown with his works *Poisoned Wheat* and *Dark Brown*, McClure is one of the masters of the long poem in American letters. It was a form he came to long before its vogue in the later years of the twentieth century, perhaps because it was well suited to the scale of his cosmic themes. If there were any doubts that he could produce a work which could stand alongside poems such as Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930) as a masterpiece of the form, his 1977 work *Antechamber* laid these to rest.

The poem represented a departure in form for McClure. Rather than placing the lines centered on the page, as he had since the mid 1950s, McClure chose to fragment the poetic line, breaking it into segments which were sometimes centered on the page and at other times might begin and end at any point on the page's surface. McClure's early intentions with centering his poems on the page had been to give the work the vertical symmetry of a living plant or a higher mammal; his intent with the new form of *Antechamber* seemed to suggest entire systems of living creatures. The visual effect could be suggestive of a field of flowers, a school of fish, or a slide full of amoebas viewed through a microscope.

The subject matter of the poem was well suited to the new form. Taking cosmology as its grand theme, *Antechamber* joyously embraces the biological surge of the universe present in all beings from the tiniest gnat to the largest forest. The poet repeatedly uses the pronoun "We" both to connect with his human audience and to celebrate humanity's union with "cousin angels" (43) of other species. "We are waves," he writes, "and forces intertwined / in invisible totality" (68). In the poet's view, however, humanity has failed to acknowledge this connection, and survives as "crumpled creatures" (28) living on the "shattered substrate" (27). Only
through what McClure calls “MUSCULAR IMAGINATION” can we drop the pretense of human systems and become worthy of being called “A MAMMAL PATRIOT” (39). A poem of intense beauty and exquisite clarity, Antechamber represents one of McClure’s finest mature works.

The poems from McClure’s 1983 collection Fragments of Perseus carried the poet’s vision of mammal patriotism to another level. In short poems such as “Action Philosophy,” McClure further distances himself from a sense of allegiance to government. The opening line echoes Thomas Jefferson’s “that government is best which governs least”—the same quotation, tellingly, that Henry David Thoreau selected to begin his 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government.” In “Action Philosophy” McClure, like Thoreau, yearns to be “free of ligaments and tendencies” of societal conventions. Instead, he writes, “LET ME BE A WOLF, / a caterpillar, a salmon” (47).

In “It’s Nation Time,” from the same collection, McClure calls for an alternative “SPIRITUAL NATION” based not on political goals but on “open freedom, / on flesh and biology” (44). It is a sentiment more fully addressed in the volume’s most successful poem, “Stanzas Composed in Turmoil.” Warning that we are in danger of losing our “deep behavior” as humans and as mammals, McClure admonishes his audience to transcend the “car roar” and “acid rain” (87) of current America, and accept their membership in a “mammal nation,” which lies “INSIDE / BELOW THE SOCIAL WHIRLING” (86).

Poems such as “Listen Lawrence”—a piece aimed at converting Lawrence Ferlinghetti from a Socialist to a biological world-view—approach the themes of ecological interconnectedness with a reformer’s zeal, as McClure emphatically tells his friend that humans are not “DIVISIBLE” from “our / brother and sister beings!” (39). The poem revisits the idea of a familial relationship
between species first posited in “Canticle” twenty years before—although the “cousins” of other species described in the earlier poem are now tellingly referred to as “brother and sister beings.”

Just as Poisoned Wheat had done a decade earlier, “Listen Lawrence” places the ultimate blame for the Earth’s rapidly deteriorating environment squarely on the shoulders of the world’s political systems. But by acknowledging that politics may be part of human nature, and that the destructive effects of our politics may be as natural as a bird’s song, McClure’s later poem offers a more complex—and more hopeful—reading of the situation. Noting that “our nature has endless dimensions” and options, McClure suggests that we can choose to “reject the flower of politics!” (42).

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed some of McClure’s finest poetry, but during this time he was also able to write several successful plays including Gorf (1974), General Gorgeous (1975), Range War (1977), and his very successful Josephine the Mouse Singer (1978). Based on the short story by Franz Kafka, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk,” the latter play won the Obie Award for the best play of the year in 1978. Despite the fact that all the play’s characters represent mice dressed in Edwardian and Victorian costumes, Josephine is perhaps McClure’s most conventional play—if the term can be used to describe any of his work—in terms of plot and dialogue. The play’s central figure is a gifted singer in a community of tone-deaf mice, but an artist whose talents endanger her fellow creatures and lead several to suicide. The play, like Kafka’s story before it, raises the central questions of the artist’s proper role in the community and whether art, no matter how brilliant, should take precedence over society. But, as critic Michael Feingold points out, whereas Kafka tended to view the non-human world as “a source of horrified fascination,” McClure’s affinity for the non-human allows for a rewriting of the play in which “Kafka’s nightmare view of life turns out to contain an ecstatic joy” (Josephine, Introduction).
In 1991, McClure released Rebel Lions, his first collection of new poems since 1983’s Fragments of Perseus. The years between the two volumes had been both difficult and transforming, and the poems in Rebel Lions reflect major changes in the poet’s life. His long marriage to his wife Joanne had ended with divorce, and he had found a new love with sculptor Amy Evans, whom he would later marry. These events are captured in the deeply personal “Stanzas From Maui,” a poem which McClure describes as capturing the “moment in which one who is dying of one love is born into another” (113).

The collection reflected other changes as well, including the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration with Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek. In the late 1980s the two had begun to perform together, with McClure reading his poetry aloud to accompaniment by Manzarek. Several of the poems in Rebel Lions reflect the “third mind” generated by this collaboration, including McClure’s “Czechoslovakia,” a poem which begins with a childhood memory of the beginning of World War Two and expands to a brilliant condemnation of war as an ugly and ubiquitous force in modern life: “it is thick underfoot and sticks to the shoes / stinking” (58).

Opposition to the Gulf War of 1991 sparked the title poem for McClure’s next major collection, Simple Eyes, in 1994. Calling it his “most gestural” poem, McClure compares the work to the “spiritual autobiography” created by the physical gestures of the abstract expressionist painter (Simple Eyes vii). The poem follows McClure’s memory through the wars of his lifetime: the Second World War of his early childhood, the Cold War, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, as well as the war against the environment, and what the poet refers to as the “wars of the ego” and “the spiritual war” (21).

Though ostensibly a poem about war, “Simple Eyes” is also obsessed with the workings of memory. The poem is illustrated with
a snapshot of McClure at the age of eleven, an image which is duplicated several times alongside the text, serving as a touchstone for the poet’s journey back through childhood recollections, as “Simple Eyes” takes the reader through thirteen projective fields of memory. “I am this PHOTOGRAPH,” he reminds himself (50), recalling the blinding moment of the flashbulb and the texture of the sweater he wore as a child. These memories are juxtaposed with the “dropping bombs” and “baby cries” of war, too soon to be recognized as an omnipresent force in his life (36). The poem evokes a remembered moment before the child comes to realize that war is a commonplace occurrence in human existence, something as “REAL AS A BRICK IN THE RAIN” (45).

With two collections published in 1999, Rain Mirror and Touching the Edge: Dharma Devotions from the Hummingbird Sangha, McClure’s poetry turned toward the Far East for its primary model. The poet had been interested in Eastern thought since his early Beat days, although not to the extent of his colleagues Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen. In the 1990s, however, McClure approached Zen practice with a renewed interest and enthusiasm, an enthusiasm reflected in his most recent works.

Rain Mirror contains two major sections. The first, “Haiku Edge,” is a series of fifty-eight haikus, linked by their setting in the hills near San Francisco Bay where the poet resides. Although the poems bear the McClure signature of being centered on the page and frequently erupting into capital letters, they are undeniably haikus, offering the same momentary flash of perception that we find in Basho or in Jack Kerouac’s best Americanized haikus. Most of the poems take the flora and fauna of the Bay Area as their subject, giving the collection a quality of “place” that is present in much of Gary Snyder’s work. Often what makes these poems memorable, however, is their departure from the traditional “natural” haiku subjects, and their use of quirkier, more modern
objects as subject matter, pairing assault rifles with stars, a sunlit butterfly with a Fillmore concert light show, or a discarded Band-aid with the chirping of crickets.

In contrast to the often playful language of "Haiku Edge," the second long poem sequence in Rain Mirror, "Crisis Blossom," is a work McClure has referred to as his "most Artaudian poem," in that it uses a moment of crisis as "an instrument of exploration" (x). "Crisis Blossom" is divided into three parts, "Graftings," "After the Solstice," and "After Meltdown," and chronicles the "psychophysical meltdown" that McClure endured in the late 1990s. The first section is raw and intense, and stands as some of the most obscure—and yet psychologically gripping—work of McClure's career. While the poems in this section do not clarify the roots of the poet's torment, they do clearly demonstrate the severity of it: "Should I order cyanide or should I order champagne?" he asks at one point, quoting darkly from an old Cole Porter song (47).

"After the Solstice," the poem's second section, details the poet's reaction to a brush with what he calls "the indescribable endless" (81) in a narrowly-missed air crash, the event that triggers the "psychophysical meltdown" (ix) described in the poem's final section, "After Meltdown." The language of the poem's final section is fragmented, labored, and struggling for coherence. Speaking in one-word utterances loosely strung together, the poet's frightened and disjointed voice captures what McClure later recalled as "fortunately [. . .] a rare state of being" (x). "NOW / I / KNOW / NOTHING / BUT / THAT / THIS / HURT / ME," he writes (85).

Touching the Edge, also published in 1999, follows the poet back to health in ninety-nine poems reflecting McClure's new course of Zen practice. While its title may refer to the frightening experience laid out in Rain Mirror—that of literally "touching the edge" of existence—the poems in this volume display a renewed vitality and a willingness to find wonder in everyday life, and in "HOW /
ORDINARY / and / EXOTIC / the world is” (65). The poems are arranged as long, centered, vertical scrolls, each putting forth a single insight, much like extended versions of the haikus in “Haiku Edge.”

McClure’s most recent collection of poems, *Plum Stones: Cartoons of No Heaven*, was published in 2002. In this work, the poet moves still further into the insights gleaned from Buddhist practice. Like many of the poems in McClure’s lengthy career, these are nature-centered works, but in place of the angry biocultural manifesto of *Poisoned Wheat*, or the strident mammal patriotism of the poems in *Fragments of Perseus*, there is a tone of mindfulness and acceptance of a constantly changing universe in *Touching the Edge* and *Plum Stones* that is often absent in the poet’s earlier works.

While the tenor of McClure’s work has undergone many changes in a literary career that now spans nearly fifty years, his central message has remained quite constant. Acknowledging the “biological self,” envisioning the universal “undersoul,” and embracing humankind’s mammalian “wisdom of the gut” are his means of unifying mind and body, humanity and nature. His persistent demand that humanity come “OUT OF THE CLOSET OF POLITICS / and into the light of their flesh and bodies!” (*Fragments of Perseus* 42) remains a constant in his message as the poet enters his seventies. Whether in revolt against the political forces he saw as the causes of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, or against the forces of environmental destruction in the twenty-first century, for McClure, the chief means of survival are the rejection of political solutions and the embrace of a new view of the world, one which is both biologically and spiritually aware.

McClure has said that as he sees it, “the function of poetry is to create myriad-mindedness” (*Lighting* 6). Certainly his own life’s work bears this out. He is a writer whose career has blended modern ecology with the “uncarved block” of Tao, the spontaneity of
abstract expressionism with the precision of poetry, the lore of the American west with the philosophy of the Far East, and outrageous acts of revolt with serene meditation. A writer willing to shatter boundaries of all types—literary, biological, and political—Michael McClure's myriad-mindedness has provided him with a rich "substrate" which has allowed him to write some of the most innovative and challenging works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
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ROD PHILLIPS is an Assistant Professor of Writing and American Culture at Michigan State University's James Madison College. He earned a doctorate in American Studies from Michigan State and has published broadly in the field of American literature, including articles on Herman Melville, Jack Kerouac, Lew Welch, Kathy Acker, and Tennessee Williams. His critical study of nature and ecology in the writings of the Beat movement, "Forest Beatniks" and "Urban Thoreaus": Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Lew Welch, and Michael McClure, was published by Peter Lang in 2000. A chapbook of his poetry, Bullheading on the Looking Glass, was published in 2001. He lives near Wacousta, Michigan, on the banks of the Looking Glass River, with his wife Anne and their sons Robert and Thomas.

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