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New Stories, Secret Selves: A Meditation on Literary Form in McPherson's *Elbow Room*

James Alan McPherson's *Elbow Room* is obsessed with literary form. The story pits an unnamed black author against his similarly anonymous white editor, positioning the narrative framework in a space of literary revision rather than publication. Within this tempered environment literary whiteness and blackness are thrown into high relief as McPherson wrestles with what it means to be an author or an editor, and the phenomena of "secret selves" and "new" stories. *Elbow Room* is challenging to treat with in that it extends unresolved threads in different directions, tantalizing a reader eager to tie them all into a neat little bow of literary theory. But with recurring concepts of morality and understanding in one hand, pervasive representation of the story's only notable female character as a bird in the other, and a juxtaposition of idealism and cynicism slipping through their fingers, even the most perceptive literary analyst is likely to fumble in the act of ligature. Although *Elbow Room* deals almost exclusively in race and race relations, it leaves the impression of filtering broad existential questions about authorship, narrative structure and self through an inevitable framework of race, rather than the other way around; as if the story is reaching for something beyond black and white, beyond even the reconciliation of black and white represented by the arrival of a mixed-race baby, to raise esoteric questions about life and literature that are circumstantially complicated by skin color. Thus *Elbow Room* is itself a foray into "fresh forms" of literature that discusses authorship, editorship, and literary convention as they relate to race both in narrative and meta-narrative. As an experimental projection this story has no neat and tidy takeaway, but gestures toward a frustratingly circular set of conclusions in which authors *must* tell "new" stories but are

prevented from doing so by convention, lack of access and understanding, social and temporal climate, and—ultimately—race.

The narrative of *Elbow Room* works on two levels: Innermost is the story of Paul Frost, a white, Kansas-born man and his black bride, a “magic” woman named Virginia Valentine (263). Their San Francisco wedding produces a “very fine couple” who “[seem] eager to pick up and mend the broken pieces of fragmented lives” (267). Privy to this idealistic and hopeful union is the author and narrator of McPherson’s story. He is mysteriously acquainted to Paul and Virginia and it is his account of their lives that exclusively informs the plot of *Elbow Room*. Yet this author-narrator is himself a character in a meta-narrative all its own. As he praises and condemns Paul and Virginia at turns, this fictional black author is being censured by a rigid and intolerant white editor. In this way the text is framed by a narrator’s experience of the central couple and reframed by an editor’s experience of the author’s text. As McPherson undoubtedly intended, *Elbow Room* can be additionally reframed on the level of meta-meta-narrative by the experience of a reader interpreting its words, but this consideration is so broad and individually variable it can hardly bear fruitful analysis as a whole. No, the real analytical gold lies in pairing narrative and meta-narrative with the hyperawareness of form that sets *Elbow Room* off on an odd note.

“Narrator is unmanageable. Demonstrates a disregard for form bordering on the paranoid,” proclaim the first two sentences of text, which a reader comes to understand from the italicized font to be editorial interjection (256). Paranoid is a perfect word for the concern *Elbow Room* shows for literary structure and form. The editor reveals his personal bias for conventional form by decrying the author’s *“barbaric disregard for the moral mysteries, or integrities, of traditional narrative modes,”* and continually asking for clarification, consolidation and restructuring (256). This anonymous editor’s strong preference for tried-and-true literary modes

is contrasted by his author's seemingly insatiable desire for "fresh forms," an ideal of personal freedom he defines as "unrestricted access to new stories forming" (262). Indeed it is this desire that connects *Elbow Room's* author/narrator to Paul and Virginia in the first place. But his thirst for "unrestricted access" to Virginia's wealth of stories is laced with a surprising selfishness. "Virginia I valued for her stock of stories," he says continuing "I was suspicious of Paul Frost for claiming first right to these. They were a treasure I felt sure he would exploit" (262). No thought is given to Virginia herself, only her stories and Paul's claim to them interest the narrator who later notes Paul's "keen eye for value," a strange characteristic to highlight in the context of marriage (263). And in fact, the motives that inform this text—right down to its self-conscious preoccupation with form—tend more toward the self-*ish* than the self-*less*.

Just as self-interest seems to fuel male concern for and exploitation of Virginia and her stories, selfishness' wide and varied influence can be felt throughout the text. Self seems to be inextricably linked to story as evidenced by the narrator's musings. "I need your part of the story in order to complete my sense of self," he says, indicating with the word "need," as opposed to "desire" or even "request" that the very stuff of another's story is essential to his completeness (261). This positions *Elbow Room's* fictional author not as benevolent narrator, but as a literary vampire who uses the stories of others to sustain himself. Even Virginia's remarkable kindness is secondarily attributed to selfish motivations. The narrator judges Paul Frost to be a "very lucky innocent" because "Virginia Valentine was protecting him to heal herself" (265). In this way Paul's soul, which the narrator deems to be uniquely intact, is in fact sheltered by Virginia's need for personal healing rather than her own desire to protect him—a selfish act that happens to produce nurturing results.

This idea of selfishness, where *-ish* indicates “of or belonging to a person or thing,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, goes beyond the common usage in reference to uncharitable behaviors to resound on a much deeper level within *Elbow Room*. Underlying the text’s obsession with literary form is an obsession with what McPherson—by way of his fictional author/narrator—dubs the “secret self” (257). Secondary only to Virginia’s “stock of stories” in the narrator’s account of her, is her possession of a secret self (262). He writes: “the more I looked into her costume, the more I recognized it as the disguise of a person trying to deflect attention away from a secret self,” continuing that she possessed a “sensitivity too finely tuned to risk exposure to the world” (263). But surprisingly, in regard to the delicate nature of a secret self, the narrator’s degenerate thirst for the stories of others flags. “As I grew aware of myself in pursuit of [Paul’s secret self], I began to feel embarrassed, and a little perverse” he writes, bringing a new awareness to the search for stories (264).

This brief hesitation to pry too deeply into another’s secret self—given that McPherson and his authorial mouthpiece link the self inextricably to the story—is complicated by the asserted necessity of “fresh forms.” In probing insensitively the author acknowledges that he would cause a person to “shudder, tremble, perhaps denounce me as an assailant” continuing that the alternative “to not do this was to default on my responsibility to narrate fully. There are stories that *must* be told, if only to be around when fresh dimensions are needed” (261). This tension between forcibly illuminating a new—perhaps previously secret—story, and being occupationally obligated to do so is a dynamic that unfurls throughout the length of *Elbow Room*. In the middle of his account of Paul and Virginia’s story the author recognizes his foreignness in a narrative not his own, but even in this realization he cannot contain himself, saying “it was not my story, but I could not help intruding upon its materials” (270). And this intrusion provokes an

outburst from Paul that ends in shouts of “Why don’t you just *leave!* Why don’t you just *get out!*” (272). Paul’s reaction is a real-life iteration of one predicted by the narrator earlier when he says that in asking for a part of someone’s self he may be denounced as an assailant.

Recognizing this, he writes “I left them alone with their dinner. It was not my story. It was not ripe for telling until they had got it under better control” (261, 272).

Out of the narrator’s involvement in and ultimate judgment of Paul and Virginia’s story arises another concern besides the tension between personal narrative and authorial responsibility. This second matter engages with the outer level of narrative action in *Elbow Room*, namely the meta-narrative between author and editor. Just as the author tries to influence, curtail and refine Paul and Virginia’s story, his own text is treated similarly by a distant and detached white editor. “*Narrator has a responsibility to make things clear*” scrawls McPherson’s cryptic redactor. His author, offering precious little additional clarity answers “Narrator fails in this respect. There was no clarity. There was no focus. There was no control” (278). This vague discussion of literary form and organization is well and good taken on its own, but the author’s justification that “there was no control” comes rather hotly on the tail of his own abandonment of Paul and Virginia’s story until such a time came that they had “got it under better control” (278, 272). In this way *Elbow Room* seems to work within concentric circles of editing, exposing the hypocrisy of narrator who pushes back against the conventional suggestions of his editor while decrying the characters of his own story for lacking these same attributes. Certainly, the author has much more subtlety and grace than his boorish editor, but in harvesting the stories of others, regardless of how “fresh” they are, the author acts as editor to Paul and Virginia’s story even as his is simultaneously acted on by his own editor.

A central instance of this trope of editing and being “edited upon” is offered by Paul when he finally understands the point of the author’s initial uninvited interjection and begins “confronting the hidden dimensions of his history” (275). The narrator relates that in the pursuit of “other points of view” Paul “underlined a great deal, scribbled questions in the margins, asked questions openly” (276). This behavior unmistakably mirrors the interaction of an editor with a text, and with this vignette an inner circle of editorship is added to those of the narrator editing Paul and Virginia’s story and the editor editing the narrator’s resulting text. If “fresh literary forms” are truly the aim of *Elbow Room* then these ever-refracted roles of editorship exist not to aid but to hamper it. Paul does not appreciate the narrator stepping in and trying to “edit” his own life story and the narrator does not agree with any of the edits his editor tries to impose on his text. In the end, however, the narrator seems to sense that perhaps his actions are furthering the cycle he fights so ardently against. In response to his editor’s disparaging missive to “*Clarify the meaning of this comment,*” the narrator replies “I would find that hard to do.” The content of the comment for which the editor desires clarification is fodder for a whole different set of considerations, it is the rest of the author’s response to his editor that is pertinent in this context. The narrator writes: “It was from the beginning not my story. I lack the insight to narrate its complexities. But it may still be told... The mother is a bold woman. The father has a sense of how things should be. But while waiting, I will wager my reputation on the ambition, if not the strength, of the boy’s story” (286). In this final admission the narrator seems to sense that imposing himself on Paul and Virginia’s story is as useful as the imposition his own editor enacts on his text, that is to say, not useful at all. Beyond leaving his character’s story to their own jurisdiction, the author’s admission that perhaps he “lacks the insight to narrate its complexities” points obliquely to a question that looms broadly over *Elbow Room*: Can the “fresh forms” it so

ardently seeks be manufactured or even captured? Or must they be arrived at by accidental discovery rather than be-labored search-and-rescue? The narrator seems to have come to the latter conclusion when he indicates that he will wait patiently for the maturation of Paul and Virginia's story, allowing fresh forms to take shape rather than forcing them into conventional spaces.