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JAMES McAULEY

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For James McAuley, poet, polemicist and founding editor of Quadrant, emptiness was the central fact of modern secular life. Left unfilled, it became home for the demons that threatened to bring disaster on both the individual and society. The fear of social and personal disintegration haunts his early poems, ambiguously in the Blue Horses that "stamp among the spiritual mills" and "weave a universe from our decay", more terribly in the "monstrous form of God's antagonist" that sprang from Aldebaran as the incarnation of Sirius.[1] This fear drove him from anarchism through Buddhism to the Catholicism that offered the certainty and structure he needed. In his poetry, the firm prosody controls the centrifugal impulses to violence and disintegration. In his public life, his inner fears were projected on to the threat of world communism. His energies were directed against secular liberals whose attraction to modernism jeopardised the moral order, whose inclination to socialism shifted responsibility from the individual to the state, and whose flirtation with communism threatened the power of the state to guarantee the liberty of its citizens against foreign aggression and domestic subversion. When, in 1956, he became editor of of Quadrant, its pages provided the arena for his literary, moral and political battle.

McAuley's hatred of communism was based on far more deeply seated motives than either a residual liberalism and distrust of the state or opposition to totalitarianism. For him, Communism represented the ultimate form of secular, instrumental reason that had disrupted the proper direction of European history since

the Reformation. His commitment to fight against it was the equivalent of the total commitment of Malraux or Sartre against the contingency of history. Unlike them, however, he had no sense of the artist or the intellectual discovering the truth by constructing himself through his own choices and actions. Rather, his duty was to discover himself in the greater truth that lay behind the history of European Christendom, and to make this truth again operative in the affairs of the contemporary world. Communism, from this perspective, was evil not merely because it was a conspiracy against the freedom of the individual, but because even when it lacked political power it worked with others to destroy the grounds on which any social order could stand. In waging war against it, therefore, he was not merely engaging in debate to expose the falsity of its premisses and so win its adherents to his side, but was wrestling with the embodiment of evil. This belief explains the distinctive tone of McAuley's Quadrant, so different from the genteel liberalism of the Congress's British journal, Encounter. For McAuley had already identified the enemy as secular modernism, a term that brought under the one label "liberalism, positivism, naturalism, agnosticism, materialism, pantheism, secularism, naturalism, socialism, progressivism."[2] Under his editorship Quadrant was committed to fighting the whole unlovely horde.

Yet there was a conflict between this commitment and McAuley's desire to make the journal a "medium of purpose and influence" among Australian intellectuals.[3] His editorial comment in the first issue declares that Quadrant will "try to be liberal and progressive", but immediately distinguishes this aim

from "the rituals of sentimental and neurotic leftism" and its delusion that "the totalitarian Beast from the Abyss is really a big woolly bear which the little men who have had a busy day in this country can safely cuddle as they sink into the dreamland of Peaceful Co-existence".[4] This position leads him, by way of a description of the exciting possibilities of a world linked and expanded by science but facing a "thoroughgoing crisis in social relationships", to an apocalyptic vision of the "advance to world domination of Communism:

> Suddenly this one huge glaring visage, this enormous mask made of blood and lies, starts up above the horizon and dominates the landscape, a figure of judgement speaking to each person in a different tone or tongue, but with the same question: And what do you think about <u>me</u>? Then indeed we hear the ghosts of rhetorical humanisms, academic positivisms, and progressive illuminisms (whose frightening heir and fulfilment Communism is) squeak and gibber in the streets, imploring us to maintain the most rigorous neutrality as between the 'warring fanaticisms' of right and wrong, truth and falsity, liberty and slavery, honour and dishonour, resistance and submission. But events whirl these ghosts resistlessly around and away, the dead leaves in a gale.[5]

The images of the monster and the ghosts are from Milton, suggesting Satan releasing Sin and Death into the world. McAuley later identified Satan's promise to humankind as the common first principle of both secular humanism and communism,

describing it as:

> the serpent's ideology: 'you shall be as gods'. Man shall decide, shall rule, shall reveal, shall determine the categories of good and evil--not God, whether He be dead or alive. Not Christus Pantocrator, who shall divinize men by incorporation with Himself: but Humanitas Pantocrator, who shall divinize all the human units in the perfected collectivity on earth.[6]

McAuley derives the image of these dupes of humanism swept around like leaves in the gale from Milton, who uses it for the fallen angels who lie "Thick as Autumnal leaves that Strow the Brooks / In Vallombrosa". Before Milton the image takes us further back to Dante and before him to Virgil, both poets who celebrate the divine order that authorizes the secular.[7] Similarly, McAuley identifies God as the Pantocrator, the static figure at the centre of the saints in a Byzantine dome, rather than as the Creator, which would suggest the more active source of energy portrayed in the Renaissance humanist tradition of such artists as Michelangelo. McAuley's divine order is eternally present, in eternal opposition to the humanist idea of progress.

This juxtaposition gives a clue to the nature of his objections to both humanism and liberalism. Although he rejected Milton's theology, he respected him as one of the major poets who "wrestle faithfully with the dark riddle of man's existence; they show us, in the magic mirror of art, man foolish and failing and seemingly overwhelmed by appalling forces, yet somehow preserving hope and love".[8] Yet Milton was also a revolutionary,

committed to the four propositions that threaten the only possible basis of human order. These propositions, and their political corollaries, McAuley identified as the beliefs that:

> A perfect society is possible/The Kingdom of God is at hand as a political event.
> The present system is the sole barrier to attaining the perfect society and is therefore essentially evil and must be destroyed, not reformed/The monarchy and established church are the Antichrist which must be destroyed.
> The enlightened elite (who define themselves by believing propositions 1 and 2) have a right or mandate to override the majority and impose their will/The Saints (i.e. Puritan zealots) have a mandate from heaven to overthrow the Government and bring in the new order by force.
> After the revolution power must be confined to the loyal true believers, while all backward elements are converted or rendered historically inoperative/The new order will be 'the rule of the Saints' in which 'dominion is founded in grace' i.e. power is confined to the Politburo and its cadres.[9]

McAuley separates Milton's poetry from his beliefs, arguing that the power of the poetry provides a satisfactory resolution to the conflict of good and evil within the poem. This interpretation, by valuing form over content, effectively denies the power of the individual will that motivates and animates the whole epic. Milton's will imposes grammatical and prosodic form on his content, subduing the Satanic will to rebel not by the power of a God outside the epic but by the focre of the author

within ~~through~~ it. This appropriation of the justifying role of God is Milton's ultimate act of rebellion. By taking on himself the role of justifying God's ways to man, he ~~thus~~ sets himself against God, but by keeping God in the poem he destroys it poetically. The failure to contain his own ambition is an analogy of the history of rebellion which, as McAuley notes, begins with the demand for total liberation and ends with total despotism (p.118). McAuley's wish to keep Milton in the party of God by separating the poet from the rebel invalidates his own argument, which is based ultimately not on personal submission to the will of God, which Milton achieves, but on submission to the order of God. This order appears first in Virgil, who in turn guides Dante to his vision of its immanence in the totality of human history.

This understanding of human history as a cyclical encounter of good and evil underlies McAuley's approach to both literature and politics. Although he recognizes the historical distance between Milton and the authors of Genesis on the one hand and of the Communist Manifesto on the other, he sees them as sites of the same eternal struggle, of which the Cold War is merely the latest manifestation. Milton's understanding of the individual is not something contingent on history but a continuing moral deformation, just as the modern belief in a benevolent state is merely a renewal of the illusions of the puritan regicides.

Yet even in the consistency of McAuley's beliefs there is a contradiction. Ultimately, he rejects liberal humanism not merely because it is secular but because it takes the individual as its final measure, viewing man as "an autonomous being, a sovereign mind and will."[10] Yet his politics is grounded in the

belief in the absolute responsibility of the individual and his ability to recognise absolute truth, as opposed to the communist subjection of the individual to the demands of history and the moral relativism of dialectical materialism. By rejecting the sovereignty of the individual, McAuley separated himself from the views of his mentor, John Anderson, the Sydney empiricist philosopher to whom he otherwise is indebted for his understanding of the relations between the individual and society.

Although McAuley's collaboration with Harold Stewart to ridicule modernism through their creation of the poet Ern Malley was a product of the nihilistic anarchism to which he was early attracted, the title of his collection of essays, The End of Modernity[11], suggests his desire to go beyond this historical phase. Unfortunately, he succeeded only in going backwards. Certainly, he did not regress, like Norman Lindsay and the Vision school, to adolescent fantasies of paganism, but his conception of a divinely ordered organic society was equally mythical and anachronistic. This in turn determined his attitude to Australia. His Christian belief necessarily separated him from earlier adherents of the Sydney tradition, who were content to leave the rest of society to wallow in its mediocrity while they pursued their lonely aesthetic quest. McAuley by contrast was committed to the redemption of humankind, which he believed could occur by renewing the European tradition in the free space provided in the new World of Australia. The journal Quadrant, which he edited from its foundation in 1956, he saw as recovering this space from communists and their humanist allies. The task was both universal and national. As he explained in his first

editorial, Quadrant aimed to be "Australian in . . . orientation, quite naturally, because we are interested in this country, its people, its problems, its cultural life, its liberties, and its safety".

The Australia McAuley identified with was characterized by the institutions of parliamentary democracy and the common law, which provided for him the ideal "school of freedom and civility and prudence". Since institutions form part of the European inheritance, "to be a good Australian is to be a local variety of that 'free and lawful man', the traditional ideal of Western civilization". This he distinguishes from the "ugly nineteenth-century vice of cultural nationalism, which imposes 'Australianity' as an anti-intellectual criterion, limiting the scope of the mind and serving only as giving a false value to mediocrity."[12] This was certainly a reference to Meanjin, which McAuley had condemned as "effectively a fellow-travelling publication", and Overland, whose contents he had once likened to union propaganda.[13]

The true nature of nationalism, as McAuley understood it, is demonstrated in his epic poem 'Captain Quiros' (1964), where Quiros' voyage to Tierra del Espiritu Santo becomes an analogy for the quest for a true Australia of the spirit, and the failure of his settlers a model for the failure of the Australian people to recognize their destiny. The contrast between the enlightened leader and his quarrelsome followers is a recasting within the order of the divine of Norman Lindsay's secular world view. While for Lindsay, the artist discovered the vision through his innnate powers, for McAuley the vision comes directly from God and the role of the searcher is to find the place on earth where it may

be made real. Yet his epic demonstrates that even when this place is found men bring with them the original sin that once again destroys the vision of a holy commonwealth in an orgy of disease, treachery, bloodshed and death.

The poem is supposedly written in three parts, by Belmonte, Quiros's secretary. In the first part of ~~this poem~~ he tells, from other men's memories, the history of Quiros' initiation into the recurring cycle of search, discovery and destruction as he sails as lieutenant on Mendana's expedition to the Solomon Islands. He opens this part with an invocation of a still earlier voyage, where we see the four ships floating in the midst of the blue Pacific with the stillness and vividness of a mediaeval illumination where all turbulence and passion is contained within the order of God. The same sense of a world held still by the power of the ~~mediated by art~~ artist comes through the description of Mendana's landfall, when, "As if to set a seal on this belief, / Just as Mendana entered through the reef, / The morning star with magian brightness shone". (p.112) But, in keeping with the mediaeval framework, disorder enters from the margins:

> . . . on shore the light
> Of this celestial sign was somewhat tarnished
> When naked bowmen, savagely polite,
> Offered a boy's cooked arm and fingers, garnished
> With taro-roots.
>
> (p.112)

True order, the conclusion to this Proem suggests, will come only by voyaging to the "Land of the inmost heart" where we can learn

the truth of both the vision of Eden and the old selves that turn its stream to "a standing ditch". (p.113)

The first part closes this part with a quietist elegy that almost suggests that nothing matters, that the concerns of history cancel themselves out through time:

> Now all are gone, the evil with the good;
> Time has consumed them all in its ravening bound
> Almost as quickly as Malope's blood
> Was licked up by the pigs from the bare ground.
> What trace of those who ill repaid his trusting
> Welcome? An axe, a memory, both rusting
> Into oblivion, might at most be found.
>
> (p.139)

The quietism however is illusory. Malope, the Melanesian chief who gave the Spaniards welcome only to be slain by them, had had, in the poem's terms, the human and spiritual wisdom to see the divine truth kept alive by the faithful in despite of the corruptions of the majority. As a consequence, after his death he is led by the Virgin Mary, the "Lady of the Way", through a maze of starts to the cross where Christ teaches him "the meaning of his days". This vision completes the inner voyage adumbrated in the Proem and justifies Mendana's quest, thus providing continuing hope for the third voyage of the poem when Quiros in his turn embarks in search of the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit.

The Proem to the second part of the work, like the first, is built around images of cartography, but now emphasizes their

active and historical rather than their symbolic or hierophantic import. In this part, however, the writer places his emphasis on the frustration of Quiros's hopes by fate as much as on their undoing by human sin. The closing stanza suggests that the vision alone is important, keeping alive hope "Until he comes, who will come. In the mean time, the best humans can achieve is the vision of "The cosmic voices pursued in that lost land" to

> Let the drum-voices wake to prophecy;
> And through the maze-print on the trodden sand
> Let masks of vision lead the warriors on . . .
>
> (p.165)

The images come from the time he had earlier spent in New Guinea, when, as he wrote in Quadrant, he had discovered in native ritual the significance of a life still lived as sacral.[14] Yet this life, as already demonstrated in the poem, remains shadowed by "destruction's blundering hand", the closing words of this stanza. This fact had troubled Quiros in the first section, where he enquired of the chaplain why he he had permitted the bloodshed only to be given the rather unsatisfactory answer that God requires men to obey the earthly authority that maintains itself through such violence. In the second part, the Father Commissary develops this apologia further. He argues that violence arises from those who yeiled to the "last temptation" of noble minds by trying to establish the millenium on earth.

> "There it corrupts to a delirium,
> As happens to all mysteries we profane.

Witness those ravings of millenium
When sectaries who would set up Christ's reign
Initiate a carnival of blood. . . "

(p.163)

The reference is clearly to revolutionaries from Milton and the Puritans to Stalin and the Bosheviks of the twentieth century. The argument, however, although justifying God's failure to help such visionaries as Quiros, seems to contradict the mission of McAuley's poem. Yet it also explains both the mission and the experience of Quadrant, which had to endure the assaults of the sectaries and could at best keep its vision of order alive, not transform society.

The third and last part of the poem, 'The Times of the Nations', resolves the apparent contradictions by placing its events in the wider context of history. The first two parts have dealt with the specific histories of Quiros's voyages. The third completes these by taking Quiros back to the scheming and perfidious courts of a Spain that "had reached the hour / When greatness can no longer be renewed". Here his hopes are thwarted by plotting prelates, whose great word, prudence, is just a cover for "low views and treachery". McAuley's description of the wiles they use to thwart the visionary Quiros, professing admiration for his mission while defaming his record and rejecting his plans, parallels the disgust he expressed to Martin Haley about the treatment of Santamaria and his Movement at the hands of the Sydney hierarchy in 1956, two years before he started writing 'Quiros'. The picture of the Spanish churchmen matches his views on the Sydney

bishops Carrell ~~and~~ Gilroy and Carroll.

One was a churchman in the recent style,
Well-suited to a failing age of drift,
A cold mean creature with placarded smile
Whom God to try the faithful had bereft
Of magnanimity and honour. He
Made baseness seem a mode of piety;
HIs right hand blessed the victims of the left.

His close adviser was a canonist,
Well practised in dissembling double thought
In double meaning; skilful to wind and twist
All meanings till they cancelled in pure naught.
Holy detraction was his special flair,
And the light verbal web flung in air
Entangling others for the ends he sought.

(p.169)

For these prevaricating prelates, Quiros' project could bring only ruin.

"There is a time to build, a time to refrain.
The brilliant projects of this crazy head
Would weaken the whole realm through overstrain,
Bringing the very thing he fears: the power
Of heretics inrushing to devour
The cause of Christ, which is the cause of Spain."

The logic is identical to that used by Gilroy and Carroll to keep the support of the Catholic church in New South Wales behind the Labor government and to deny the apocalyptic anticommunist visions of Santamaria and the Movement to which McAuley was committed.

Quiros' particular fate at the hand of these prelates is swept up in the final section, 'The Last Vision', into universal history. The literary model for this vision is, as for the whole work, Camoens' Lusiads. In this epic Camoens portrays Vasco da Gama as the Virgilian hero bringing a new Rome to Asia and the Pacific. Although McAuley portrays Quiros as Vasco's historical successor, he has to face the facts that Quiros failed in this mission just as Australia has failed to embody his vision of a holy commonwealth. The vision of the future granted to Quiros on his deathbed follows the vision the nymph Tythos grants to Vasco da Gama from his love-bed, when she takes him to see the future of the Portuguese Empire spread out before him. But whereas Camoens's prophecy is triumphal, stretching as far as Australia, or South Irian, McAuley's view of Australia starts with convicts and concludes with a "faithless generation" for whom the holy architecture of the world lies in ruins and "nowhere can man's spirit find a home." This world is characterized by the images of his earliest poems, as

> The ancient Dragon wakes and knows his hour
> The shaken starts fall in a burning shower,
> Blue horses rearing fall throw their charioteer.
>
> (p.174)

Now, however, the shards of a ruined world are redeemed by the faith of an elect few. In a creative etymology, McAuley divides the Christus into two syllables, chrism for "the creature hallowed after exorcism", and tus, or incense. His elect are the children of the second syllable, those who keep faith alive as incense burning through the last days and in whose own lives "time's fullness has begun". (p.175) This vision of redemption is itself a fulfilment of the promise he discerns in the actual continent of Australia and its first inhabitants, the "South Land, vast, worn down and strange" where

> Man in his tribes, and insect, beast and tree,
> Set in a cyclic pattern beyond change.

and where

> . . . solemn long-shanked birds danced ritually,
> And painted men enacted and renewed
> With mime and song in rapt exalted mood
> The figured Now which is eternity.
>
> (p.173)

This vision takes us back to McAuley's earlier poems of New Guinea, where the sacral vision of life maintained by the indigenous culture is fulfilled through the work of Archbishop Boismenu, the true prelate, and his followers. Christianity, in McAuley's view, does not abolish the pagan ritual, but completes it. The true enemy is the secularism that alienates humanity from the worlds of both nature and the divine that orders it.

The problem with this vision is that it is exclusive. McAuley presents the culture of Aborigines and Islanders as commanding respect, but finally it is there only to be used, like their lands, to renew what remains essentially a European civilization. Nor are we all invited to take part in the dance that symbolizes the eternal value that this civilization shares with primitive peoples. Those of us who are not among the elect must take it on trust that their faith will redeem the world from the consequences of our sins, but it is clear that we will not share in this redemption.

Any community of the elect is by definition divisive. Beneath its aspirations towards a community of the truly human lies a rejection of the actual humanity within which any historical community must come into being. This rejection extends also to the darker side of our own nature, which we must project on others. This is what McAuley does in his Quadrant editorial, where the fears of his own violence are projected on "the ghosts of rhetorical humanisms, academic positivisms, and progressive illuminisms" that he sees txhat come beneath the glaring visage of Communism to "squeak and gibber in the streets."[15]

This exclusive vision sets the tone for Quadrant under McAuley's editorship. The first issue, which contains his editorial comment, carries also an article by Dennis Warner on 'The Communist Conspiracy in Asia' which looks at events in Asia purely in terms of the contest between European civilization and its Communist antagonist. This theme continues through later issues, which present the Cold War as the single most important issue of global politics. The poetry and fiction is for the most

part determinedly non-political, emphasizing classical standards of decorum and registering inner conflict and social ceremony. So Evan Jones's fine 'Epithalamium', also in the first issue, renews a traditional form that brings together both the outer ceremony where candles flicker and the inner drama where the raging animals are subdued through sensual love. Issue number four allows Jones to renew and this theme in another Epithalamium, this time offered as a mark of friendship to Brian Buckley and Antonia Phelan, as well as bringing us an account of the Communist strategy that has threatened Australia since 1920 and McAuley's own analysis of modernism, under the label of 'The Magian Heresy', another of the false beliefs that has led humankind away from the pattern of the divine. Issue number six includes Frank Knopfelmacher's predictions that Australian universities are being engulfed by the same forces threatening world order. At the same time, writers such as Murray Groves, A.P.Elkin and Jeremy Beckett contribute essays that by themselves enlarge our understanding of Aboriginal and New Guinea cultures, but in context contribute to the sense of a modern world betrayed by the secular tradition within which these authors in fact write.

The emphasis on the dangers of Communism and the sterility of secular humanism on the one hand, and the virtues of traditional forms and values on the other, give to the pages of Quadrant, as to McAuley's own writings, an air of distaste for common humanity that belies not only the frequent vitality of the parts but also the greater aspirations towards a truly catholic and embracing human community. The work finally is betrayed by its own divisiveness.

[1] James McAuley, Collected Poems 1936-1970, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971, pp.7, 23. On McAuley's politics and religion, see Peter Coleman, The Heart of James McAuley: life and work of the Australian poet, Wildcat Press, Sydney, 1980, particulary pp.34-45, 62, 104, 106.

[2] In Twentieth Century, Winter 1956. Cited by Max Harris in review of Quadrant in Westerly, no.1, 1967.

[3] McAuley to R.Krygeir, 16 Aug 62. AACF papers, NLA MS2031, Box 4.

[4] McAuley, 'Comment: by way of Prologue', Quadrant, vol.1. no1, 1956-57, p.4.

[5] Ibid., p.5.

[6] ibid., 'On Being an Intellectual', Quadrant, vol.iv, no.1, 1959-60, p.30

[7] Milton, Paradise Lost, Book I, lines 302-03; Dante, Inferno, Canto III, line 112; Virgil, Aeneid, Book VI, lines 309-10.

[8] 'Milton's Difficulties in Paradise Lost' (1974), The Grammar of the Real: selected prose 1959-1974, MUP, Melbourne, 1975, pp.107-8.

[9] 'A Visit to Bunhill', Grammar of the Real, pp.117-18. I have juxtaposed the two tables of propositions that McAuley prints sequentially.

[10] McAuley, 'On Being an Intellectual', Quadrant, vol IV, no.1, Summer 1959-60, pp.29-30.

[11] The End of Modernity: essays on literature, art and culture, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1959.

[12] Quadrant, vol.1, no.1, p.3.

[13] Reference to Meanjin in the submission McAuley wrote for Editorial Committee of AACF in relation to proposed journal; Copy in Donald Horne papers, ML MSS3535, file Q2. Reference to Overland is quoted from memory--I have been unable to relocate source.

[14] James McAuley, 'My New Guinea', 1961, in Grammar of the Real, OUP, Melbourne, 1975, pp.162-173. For relationship between his experience of primitive ritual and the Chritian faith, see particularly p.169.

[15] Quadrant, vol.I, no.1, op.cit., p.5.