Photo: *The Mercury*, Hobart

JAMES MCAULEY

JAMES PHILLIP McAULEY (1917-1976)

JAMES McAULEY died on 15 October 1976, three days after his fifty-ninth birthday. He was born in Lakemba on 12 October 1917, and educated at Fort Street Boys' High School and the University of Sydney. After some early experience as a schoolteacher, and his years in the army during World War II, he divided his academic career between the Australian School of Pacific Administration, where he lectured in Government from 1946 to 1960, and the University of Tasmania, where he was appointed Reader in Poetry in 1960, and where he occupied the Chair of English from 1961 until his death. He was founding editor of the periodical *Quadrant* (1956) and even in the last year of his life took a close interest in its affairs. He was elected to the Academy of the Humanities in 1969.

James McAuley did not think of himself as a scholar. He was first of all a poet, and perhaps it is difficult, even impossible, for a poet to give that sustained and detailed attention to the work of another writer which is demanded of the textual critic, editor and biographer. Yet his election to the Academy was a recognition both of his distinction as a poet, and of the range and depth of his intellectual interests. If he was not, in the orthodox sense, a scholar, he was that much rarer phenomenon, a man of learning.

His first volume of poetry *Under Aldebaran* (1946) revealed a fine poetic talent and a mind already engaged with large philosophical questions, and enriched by a knowledge of its cultural inheritance. This combination of qualities continued to distinguish his writing, and to preserve its delicate balance between a deep understanding of the past and an urgent sense of the problems and needs of the present.

There are many aspects of James McAuley's learning. His work at the Australian School of Pacific Administration and his practical experience in New Guinea were backed by extensive reading in anthropology and history. These interests, in turn, fed his longest and most ambitious poem *Captain Quiros*, and exerted a considerable influence upon his thinking about the nature of twentieth-century thought and experience. He was a good musician, and as a young man seriously considered making a career as a pianist. He liked to demonstrate his skill as a jazz pianist; but he also played the organ regularly for church services (when he was an undergraduate this helped to keep him at the university); and he liked to play renaissance and baroque music on the virginals. He wrote (with Richard Connolly) a large number of hymns. He was also a keen amateur ornithologist, and there are many lines in his poems which reflect his careful observation of the habits, songs, and flight patterns of birds.

At the centre of his intellectual interests was the large and complex set of problems related to the erosion of traditions, customs and beliefs in the modern world. He wrote about these from many points of view. One of the earliest signs of his preoccupation with the nature and meaning of modernism was the thesis (now apparently lost), written for the MA Honours degree at the University of Sydney. (At the time it was said that a problem with the thesis was that it 'went outside English into other languages'.) It dealt with poetic symbolism and symbolism as viewed in Freudian psychology. This no doubt prepared him for the argument developed in *The End of Modernity*, in which an analysis of some aspects of post-Romantic theory and practice in poetry leads to a critique of modern literature and culture. (The Ern Malley hoax may be seen as a practical demonstration of his scepticism about much modern poetry). His work on Brennan is another manifestation of this interest, as is the essay, 'Journey into Egypt'(1974), where he traces the development of 'the idea of poetry as a magical operation', and the concomitant 'suppression of the objective order, of the logical connections of discourse . . . which might bring the poet into collision with reason and experience'. His knowledge of Rilke, Novalis, Rimbaud and Mallarmé, upon whose work he draws to support his argument, enriches his writing here as elsewhere. So that whether one agrees with his analysis or not, one is meeting a mind which moves easily among the great movements of thought of the last one hundred years, and which penetrates the work of leading European poets of the period with the insight of a fellow practitioner.

In one of his last essays, written only a few weeks before he died, he returned to another aspect of this preoccupation with intellectual history. In 'A Small Testament' he refers to two unwritten essays or books. One, called 'Chartres or Kanchipuram', would have examined 'the differences between Oriental and Occidental civilizations'. The other, 'The Uniqueness of the Western Concept of the Human Person', would have been an historical and socio-cultural essay. 'A Small Testament' is in part an abstract of his unwritten works, and it shows the remarkable reach of his thinking. His extensive reading in philosophy, politics, religion, anthropology, history and literature was consistently directed towards an understanding of the nature of man and his relationship to the natural order. One feels a sense of loss that he did not consolidate his learning into an extensive work on cultural history.

James McAuley's capacity to assimilate large ideas, and to bring many different kinds of knowledge to bear upon an argument, was balanced by a strict scholarly attention to detail. This is to be seen in many of his critical articles, where he goes to great pains to verify the smallest textual details. In 'Some Poems of Judith Wright' he explores the language and metrical structure of poems in search of their logic and coherence, and the fine evaluative discriminations he makes between them, rest on his insistence that the facts of the poems be thoroughly understood. At the same time his rigorous examination is conducted with the understanding of a fellow poet, and he frequently refers to

the artistic problems Judith Wright seems to have faced in realizing her intention.

Attention to factual details gives his work on Spenser a special interest. In 'Politics versus Art in the Fifth Book of *The Faerie Queene*' he looks closely at the actual political events which may be reflected in the poem, and by doing so sharpens the interest of its allegorical events. Similarly, the relationship between Milton and Dryden is briefly but strikingly illuminated by his imaginative account of their differences based on an inspection of their political attitudes. It is framed by a report of Dryden's visit to Milton in 1674.

The impulse which again and again drove him to search for the facts, no matter how trivial they might appear to be, was also the force behind his search for the right word and the right phonetic structure in his own poetry. He commonly wrote about twenty-five or more drafts even of the shortest lyric, and the changes that he made in the later ones were most commonly refinements of sound and rhythm. The result is that, in his work as a whole, and particularly in his last collection of lyrics, *Time Given* (1976), we have a number of the finest poems written in Australia. In these, if not always in his larger philosophical searches, he managed to marry the strengths of traditional wisdom and art with the individual voice of a modern man. Though, according to his own demanding standards, he might not have been a scholar, yet through his poetry, his criticism, his teaching, and his unremitting intellectual effort, he has passed on the values of scholarly commitment to a wide community of his contemporaries and successors.

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