‘By No Stretch . . . a *Locus Amoenus*’: Traces of Dirt in the Early Poetry of James McAuley

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What could James McAuley, the cosmopolitan author of the neoclassical *Captain Quiros*, a number of intense, highly crafted lyrics and confessional poems, and collaborator in the surrealist hoax Ern Malley poems have to do with dirt? Where I live, Portugal, it is associated with the adjective dirty, (‘sujo’ or the state of ‘sujidade’), and thus associated with dust, filth, excrement, debris and rubbish more generally. In English-speaking countries dirt has a wider lexicon, also being associated with earth, mud, dust, the material of agriculture. From the microscopic to the macroscopic dirt or earth is associated with terrain: it corresponds with the Portuguese and Latin noun ‘terra’ which, in a country of much internal and external migration is frequently a metaphor for ‘home,’ a regional rather than political/geographic concept. Donna Haraway enjoys the ‘earthy tone’ of ‘terra’ (*Staying with the Trouble* 175), and it evokes at the politico-geographic level ideas of terrain, land, country and finally, if often arbitrarily, nation. Haraway also traces the word ‘human’ to the Old English/Old German *guman*, which meant both coming from the soil, and ‘rich in humus . . . earthly beings as opposed to the gods’ (169–70). Dirt also has, in English, negative connotations. In relation to the filth aspect of dirt, Mary Douglas has explored the codification of dirt or uncleanness in societal ordering, and resultant taboos, from first world to Judaic lore in *Purity and Danger* (1966), including their respective attributions from symbolic and scientific perspectives. She argues that contemporary codifications of the unclean tend to derive from scientific/pathogenic rather than symbolic or sacred systems of belief. In her reading, dirt, or pollution, might be understood more broadly as that which brings about damage or imbalance to the social order.

So looking for ‘dirt’ seems a big project, even in McAuley’s work. He bridges a number of movements in the Australian and international literary scenes, spanning forty years, from the mid-1930s until the 1976 when he died. The dirt/earth motif gives rise to questions of geography, topography, and in the literary terrain to literary nationalism, essentialism, phenomenology, spatiality, just to begin. In literary history the motif or symbol seems important in the movements of modernism, realism, and their precursor, decadence. This paper identifies several manifestations of ‘dirt,’ or earth so defined, or related, arising in McAuley’s work, over forty years, mainly the early phases of the 1930s and 1940s, though its various strands intertwine and weave through as motif, theme and archetype. They are value-charged though in differing ways, through his work’s evolution, increasingly less pejorative where they relate to the dirt/earth of the unspoiled natural world than in urban, suburban or human-dominated heroic spheres, and increasingly associated with a necessary realism, as will be seen.

McAuley’s Early Poetry

The term dirt or dirty aesthetics has been used to describe 1980s prose-writing, but also earlier to describe the records of British writers, Byron and Hobhouse, from their early nineteenth century grand tour describing dirt and poverty; a ‘dirt poetics’ in the cities of poor southern European countries (their rural was seen as fresh). Byron’s visit to Portugal in 1809 during the Peninsular Wars enabled the gathering of material, picturesque records of an often dirty ‘other,’ which would be used in his long narrative poem ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ 1812–18) (Puga).

The first variant of what might also be called a modern urban 'dirt aesthetics' surfaces in McAuley's early poetry of the mid-thirties when editing Sydney University's literary magazine *Hermes*. It conjures a dystopian, almost archaeological, vision of inner-city tattiness in the first third of the twentieth century. While there are traces through the early poems, the dystopian motifs of debris and rubbish are most fully evident in the descriptive, thinly-veiled autobiographical portrait of the anarchist[1] student living in rented rooms, in McAuley's poem 'Revenant,' dated 1939–1942, published in his first collection *Under Aldebaran* (1946):

> I enter the familiar house . . .
>
> And there's no echo. Nothing moves.
> The dust upon the floor lies still.
> Grey coals are in the unswept grate.
> The sunlight slants upon the sill
> On empty chairs. And here's a plate
>
> With a bread-crust turned to mould; a glass
> Stained with the dregs of wine. That's all. . . .
>
> I go out suddenly, as before
> Into the backyard, overgrown
> With twenty sullen months of weed; . . .
> Walking like a man who has been freed.

While this early poem evokes the theme of skin-shedding or liberation from past lives, important through his work, it shows the modernist tropes of neglect, decay and disorder evident in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, as recorded in McAuley's essay on Eliot for *Hermes* (43.1) written under the pen-name Glaucon ('The Journey of the Magus') in 1937. While appreciative of Eliot's distress at the futility, the meaninglessness of life and suffering(13) the personal impact is directly reflected in McAuley's close-to-the-bone encounter with the urban *flâneur* in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

> . . . I opened *Poems 1909–1925* in a café . . . I read on with mixed feelings, only half catching the significance of this new technique until I came on three lines expressing an image which I have often tried to find words for—rendering the picture so exactly and with just the right degree of emotional restraint.
>
> > Shall I say I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> > And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> > Of lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of windows.
>
> From then on I was a convinced disciple of Eliot. (16)

In *The Waste Land* McAuley would have remarked Eliot's luxuriant images of inner city decay—'the empty bottles and sandwich papers' and the once pristine River Thames sweating 'oil and tar' ('The Fire Sermon,' *CP* 70–73), and in 'Prufrock,' the 'one-night cheap hotels' and 'sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells' (Eliot, *CP* 13). McAuley borrows elliptically from such motifs in his early poem 'Possession' (*Hermes* 43.3, 11) whose 'Thunder and rubies at the axle tree' pays tribute to the rich grime of Eliot's 'Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree' from 'Burnt Norton' (Eliot, *CP* 190) published two years earlier in 1935.

The Waste Land arguably licensed McAuley's resort to the trope of negatively value-laden, untidy debris, the mouldy bread-crusts and wine dregs, the overgrown backyard in 'Revenant,' whose Prufrockian *persona* is further elaborated in the disillusioned artist vagabond protagonist of McAuley's early short fiction 'Under Aldebaran' (*Hermes* 45.2, 15–17). So did the imaginings of McAuley's most important early master, the modernist precursor Rainer Maria Rilke, another haunting denizen of European pavements. In 'Autumn,' McAuley's early translation of Rilke's 'Herbsttag,' its dislocated city-dwelling *persona* imagines wandering restlessly along 'deserted pavements, as the [untidy] leaves are blown' (*CP* 5).

However, McAuley's Australian symbolist and decadent ancestor Christopher Brennan, and also Charles Baudelaire, probably offered the young poet the first local vignettes of urban decay or grime, as in 'The yellow gas is fired from street to street' (from Brennan's *Poems 1913*). In his 1957 essay McAuley identified Brennan's kinship with Eliot ('Homage'136). The decadent urban subtext of McAuley's early verse caused acolyte student poet and editor Donald Horne to associate the youthful McAuley with the 'wet pavements' (224) of his early Brennan-influenced poem 'Out of Childhood' (1938), 'the sad emptiness of metropolitan youth' (224) and the legend of the lonely rooms he lived in' (226). Arguably, in his early writing, McAuley anticipates Australia's youthful grunge prose genre of the 1980s. Mention must be made here of McAuley's experiment with an inner-city "earthiness" together with a studied stylistic anarchy, in his collaboration with Harold Stewart in the 1943/44 Ern Malley poems, parodying late modernist surrealism:

> Princess, you lived in Princess St.,
> Where the urchins pick their nose in the sun
> With the left hand. . . .
> ('Perspective Lovesong,' in 'The Darkening Ecliptic,' *Angry Penguins*, June 1944)

In the Malley poems the collective McAuley (and Stewart) do not draw on universal, generalised inner-city images but on those closer to home, the iconic inner Melbourne of their sojourn there in the early to mid-1940s while enlisted in the Australian Army:

> But where I have lived
> Spain weeps in the gutters of Footscray
> ('Petit Testament,' in 'The Darkening Ecliptic')

The demise of similar working-class communities would be lamented by the left philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, 40 years later ('Notes on the New Town' 148–55). Nonetheless, in the late 1930s the aesthetics of dirt still carried the traditionally pejorative cachet in McAuley's critical vocabulary as seen in the terms of his unsigned attack in 1937, as *Hermes* editor, on the Australian publisher and critic P.R. Stephenson for his 'Literary nationalism, the theory that the artist should sit and write on his own dunghill.'('Less of It,' *Hermes* 43.1, 37).

A Modernist Earth

The other variants of dirt, earth, dust and rock become important motifs in the Australian poetic vocabulary in the late 'thirties and early 'forties, in the literary nationalism McAuley had derided in P. R. Stephenson. Aridity, and an associated dust, is an important Eliotian motif linked with vagrancy, and dying nature evident in Eliot's 'Gerontian'—'Tenants of the house, / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season' (*CP* 39)—but especially in *The Waste Land* that had impressed McAuley, and which he cited in detail when discussing 'modern dessication of

feeling' ('Journey' 14). Citing an excerpt from Eliot's 'The Burial of the Dead,' McAuley observes Eliot could see 'no solution except in redemption, and of his redemption he despairs' ('Journey' 14). The poem was written before Eliot converted to Anglicanism in 1927. Arguably McAuley intuited Eliot's crisis of faith, a state echoed in the Australian poet's 'The Tomb of Heracles' in a short passage concluding the long neoclassical Promethean narrative 'The Hero and the Hydra' (1949). It was written 12 years after his essay on Eliot, and three years before his own conversion to Catholicism in 1952:

> A dry tree with an empty honeycomb
> Stands as a broken column by the tomb:
> . . . This is the end of stoic pride and state:
> Blind light, dry rock, a tree that does not bear.
> ('The Tomb of Heracles,' *CP* 59)

McAuley's poem fuses images of aridity and fragmentation in nature and society from Eliot's 'The Burial of the Dead' in *The Waste Land* ('. . . the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,' 63) and also in 'The Hollow Men' (the broken column and hollowness, 89–92). The unresponsive unyielding 'dry rock' of McAuley's 'The Tomb of Heracles' is foreshadowed earlier in the poem by 'the limestone teeth of huge blind caves' (*CP* 47), the maze through which the exiled heroine Io must wander in avoidance of the vengeful goddess Hera. It is also echoed in the dry island 'waste' of exile in McAuley's 1945 poem titled 'Philoctetes' (*CP* 39).

The motifs or archetypes of soil and dust are most authentically elaborated in one of McAuley's earliest poems to come to general public notice, 'Envoi' written between 1936 and 1938. A short modernist poem of 4 quatrains, with its disjointed, surreal imagery signalled in the traveller's gesturing *deixis*, it echoes the themes and layering of Eliot's famous poem, using particular *topoi* to describe a local version of what might be considered waste land, a stereotypically harsh, untidy and emphatically rural Australian landscape:

> There the blue-green gums are a fringe of remote disorder
> And the brown sheep poke at my dreams along the hillsides;
> And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs,
> Comes the faint sterility that disheartens and derides. (*CP* 6)

The probably leached and degraded soil of this eucalyptus landscape conveys the 'sterility that disheartens and derides.' The national icons of 'blue-green gums' and probably dusty 'brown sheep,' metonymous with the pastoral industry, do not conform with the usual well-arranged European pastoral. The disorderly gums and brown sheep 'pok[ing] at my dream,' have the unsettling quality of nightmare. The third line evokes images of dryness in which a desultory sibilance is broken by hard-sounding 't's and 'd's—'And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs . . .' Soil, here is a close relative of dust, which according to mythologist J. E. Cirlot is linked with stone, the symbol of being, though in fragmented and disintegrated form (313). The gaze of the subject, gestured towards repeatedly by deixis: '*There* the blue-green gums . . . *there* in the soil . . .' (writer's emphasis) suggests the subject is reporting, from a distance, perhaps from Europe, like a traveller describing a foreign land. Sign-posted with desert, sterility and futility, McAuley seems to walk Eliot's track through *The Waste Land,* with a similar detachment to the inhabitants described in stanza 2 below:

> Where once was a sea is now a sunken desert,
> A futile heart within a fair periphery;

> The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them . . .

The first two stanzas foreshadow McAuley's later, much remarked, negative observation about Australia in the 1930s: 'a certain thin-ness of the environment' (Morphett interview, 2). The third stanza brings a twist when the detached subject announces a stoic reconciliation with this otherwise unhomely land: 'And I am fitted to this land as the soul is to the body . . .' Abstract qualities are introduced to amplify the more physical elements of the landscape and the subject's relationship: '. . . I know its contractions, waste and sprawling indolence: they are in me and its triumphs are my own. . . .' The subject's connection is built from knowledge and intimacy. McAuley's first landscape poem was not as invented as some critics have thought and probably stems from his time working as a tutor in rural Bungendore, NSW. We see here a significant shift from localised soil, desert and scrubby trees to the notion of 'land,' if 'uneasy.' Stanza four articulates an unstable resolution:

> Beauty is order and good chance in the artesian heart
> And does not wholly fail though we impede;
> Though the reluctant and uneasy land resent
> The gush of waters, the lean plough, the fretful seed. (*CP* 6)

Signifiers of abundance such as the word 'gush' are outweighed by those of negativity and sparseness: 'impede,' 'reluctant,' 'uneasy,' 'lean' and 'fretful.' The metaphor 'artesian heart' associates life-giving underground water of a dry land with blood of the also interior, physical heart, and good chance the natural order finally brings. The last line's opening 'gush of waters' resounds with McAuley's words a year earlier in his essay on Eliot concerning the preferred 'Ash Wednesday' (1925) and the 'Ariel' poems (1927–31). He described them as 'some of the loveliest poems he has yet achieved. . . . a *gush* of hope (writer's emphasis) has broken the drought of the waste land, new possibilities of growth disturb the soil' ('The Journey,' 15).

Here we meet the obvious and inevitable complement to earth or soil which is water, whether subterranean (pertaining to caves) or coastal and oceanic to be found on land's border, the liminal zones that might define or delineate a land's identity. Or even (in the case of dirt) water for cleansing, which Freud thought essential for civilisation: 'Dirt of any kind seems to us incompatible with civilisation' (*Civilisation and Its Discontents* 55). Paradoxically its cleanser, water, is its own product.[2] In classical mythology the River Lethe takes the deceased to the subterranean land of the dead, Hades, ruled over by Pluto. As well as earth being the source of such life-giving water, the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard writes in *La Terre et les Reveries de Repos* how earth-bound vicinities, including cellars or caves, though the locus of the chthonic, are also the locus of the unconscious (119) and of prophets (218), and can be sites of transformation.

'Envoi' reflects what Paul Kane describes as the 'difficulty of assimilating an Australian nature to the aesthetics of the picturesque' (13), a theme McAuley would develop both in this poem and in his later nature poetry. Its stanza 3 introduces the word and concept 'desert' ('where once was sea now is sunken desert'), as the topographical location of sand, earth and dust linked to a 'futile heart.' The poem introduces themes of dislocation, homelessness but also homecoming, the experience of seeing one's own country, as Robert Dixon describes, from 'close up and far away,' with a 'doubled vision' ('Scenes of Reading,' 71–79). It initiates a dialogue between the European 'metropolitan' and an 'essentialist' Australian peripheric, notably its rural tropes from which McAuley, though metropolitan by nature, could not escape and to which he would return in his later poems. This poem can be seen as twin (but first-born)

to A. D. Hope's also well-known poem 'Australia' written the following year, which coins the hypothesis ('if from deserts the prophets come'). This now well-worn literary saw has invited rebuttal. Arguing correctly for diversity, David Malouf disputes the 'old turn of mind . . . that we will only be fully at home here when we have learned to love our desert places . . .' (*A First Place* 165). Nonetheless, the earth-dominated desert remains key in the Australian imaginary, as wild, unspoiled natural sanctuary.

Eliot seemed swayed by classical mythology's mainly negative readings on the earth *topos*. For McAuley, perhaps more relevant than the Eliot's early influence, was the emergence in the late 1930s of the Australian nativist Jindyworobak movement. In its poetics, the realm of dryland, Indigenous Australia, a local variant to the iconic modernist aridity, was preferred over other landscape variants, and particularly that of the soil, of a regenerating dryland interior. This can be seen in poet Ian Mudie's 'My Land': 'Give me a harsh land to wring music from, / brown hills, and dust, with dead grass / straw to my bricks'(*The New Book of Australian Verse* 167). The Adelaide-based movement's 1938 manifesto 'Conditional Culture' promoted a recognition of the local, the reflection of environmental values and the use of imagery drawing from Australian inland history and tradition, especially of the Aboriginal people. Founder Rex Ingamells had been influenced by D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* (1923) and its observation of an Australian spirit of place. Contemporary poet Rosemary Dobson thought the group saw European modernism 'as a kind of intellectual colonialism,' arguing for a defence of the local ('A World of Difference' 377). Since 1938 the group had issued its own annual anthology, offering publication opportunities for young poets wishing to follow its new idiom of descriptive writing. They included the soon to be *avant-garde Angry Penguin* publisher Max Harris and also McAuley.

'Envoi' was probably written before the young poet became aware of the movement's declaration in 1938. It was, nonetheless, published in the Jindyworobak's third annual anthology in 1940. McAuley was clearly stirred by Jindyworobak notions in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In his letter to George Mackaness of 19 January 1942 McAuley wrote how he was 'feeling his way towards an increasing directness of presentation and a more 'localised' setting for my themes.' The link between physical earth and a political or geographical concept of land is made in his early explorer poem dated 1945: 'Henry the Navigator,' a poem probably inspired by wartime research on old maps and chronicles, notably the Portuguese court historian Gomes Eannes de Azurara's *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* to which McAuley referred in a footnote in his first collection *Under Aldebaran* (75). His poem refers to the first Portuguese voyages of discovery, notably the earth of Sagres in south-western Portugal from which some voyages departed:

> There roots of stunted bushes scrabble earth
> Like withered birds, between hard rock and sand. (*CP* 21)

In drafting these lines it is possible that McAuley may have drawn on one version of Azurara's chronicle describing the promontory of Sagres as 'a barren cape, its only natural vegetation a few junipers' (in Beazley, fn 2, viii).

McAuley researcher Michael Cook has connected the stanza with Australia, surmising that the 'black coastline of Sagres is the Iberian counterpart' of the 'reluctant and uneasy land' that 'impedes the poet's progress' in the earlier poem 'Envoi' ('James McAuley's encounter with Modernism' 227). Such negative early perceptions of the Australian topography are recorded

in the poet's later explorer poem, *Captain Quiros*, in the Dutch encounter of a 'barren coast' (*CP* 172).

If 'Envoi' is a portrait from the Australian interior then the slightly later short poem 'Terra Australis' (1939–42) is its counterpart. It is one of McAuley's best-known, most anthologised and overtly Jindyworobak-phase poems, as he confided later to his friend academic Leonie Kramer. It offers the vision from afar of the unknown continent *Terra Australis* or 'mythical Australia,' through the utopian European eyes of the Portuguese seventeenth-century explorer Captain Quiros (Pedro Fernandes de Queirós, 1563–1614) before cataloguing the details of a landscape of iconic, local, named flora (wattle blossom, angophora) and fauna (the 'insolent emu,' magpies and cockatoos.) Dirt arguably appears (not only in the title 'Terra') in the form of tropical zone anthills suggested in the '. . . ecstatic solitary pyres / Of unknown lovers, featureless with flame' (*CP* 16). The proffered 'land of similes' is a land of concepts, developed further in the long poem of voyage *Captain Quiros* (*Quiros*), as the much-desired, utopian 'Land of the inmost heart.' Quiros's only glimpse of Australian earth was posthumous, in a telescopic vision in McAuley's long poem of a 'South Land, vast, worn down, and strange': and the seeming portolan chart miniatures of 'Man in his tribes, and insect, beast and tree' (*CP* 173). While that first glimpse reflects a period romanticising what Kane calls a 'poetics of origins' (28), it also inscribes McAuley's early postcolonial anxiety in cataloguing Australia's grim colonial history, with its motifs of the extreme pollution of poison: 'A colony begun …/ The natives shot and poisoned from their land' (*CP* 173).

With sixteen years' experience (1944–60) as lecturer on colonial administration at the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA), McAuley was no stranger to the observations of anthropologists. While he succeeds in preserving the seventeenth-century mind-frame of its narrator, the secretary Belmonte, this long poem of McAuley's middle phase makes a strong critique of human exceptionalism in the way that it addresses *unclean* behaviour and in its treatment of the other, evident in these journeys of 'discovery.' Quiros' voyagers and traders who 'roam the earth [making] / Their kingdoms in the Indies' only too clearly demonstrate: 'They bear the old selves within them that could turn / The streams of Eden to a standing ditch' (*CP* 113). Such narratorial disdain is consistent with the Franciscan perspectives of the navigator Quiros, and historically based. In his death-bed vision in Panama, Quiros's dystopian view of humankind ('estranged within the city man has made,' *CP*,175) is nonetheless diluted by a more hopeful glimpse of the future for an Australian local: 'Yet in their lives time's fullness has begun' (175) because 'Nature has taken refuge in their hearts.' McAuley's usage of 'Nature' in this context does not necessarily exclude a broader glossing that might today include concepts of earth, environment or country. The latter term would probably not have been intended by McAuley in 1958–1960 when writing *Quiros*. However, his encounters with 'Nature' do not escape the social domain but become underlain with themes of repair and restoration drawn from his encounter, before writing *Quiros*, with the work of Thomas Aquinas. These are reflected in his prose musing on human responsibility for a broader kind of 'housekeeping' 'taking place in an unseen way, the *opus Christi*, namely the hallowing of creatures, the redintegration of a damaged reality' ('Notes and Speculations' 1958, 168). It raises the question of a neglected sacred. This argument of 'redintegration' anticipates to some degree the post-apocalyptic advocacy of Donna Haraway for humankind in what she calls 'chthulucene' epoch, a 'timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (*Staying with the Trouble*, 2). Impelled by a sense of responsibility, *Quiros* concludes with a strong emphasis on this theme, which resurfaces, rancorously at times, including in McAuley's later 'Coles Bay' nature poems.

The above excerpts from McAuley's explorer poems bring us into the theoretical domain of earth as political geography, in which space and place become overlain with questions of nationhood and identity, raising a myriad of issues and concerns from differing perspectives. *Quiros* invokes the motif of palimpsest in discovery history: 'the keels of navigators crossed and re-crossed.' Ross Gibson sums up well 'the mesmerised preoccupation with topography [of] Europeans who have attempted [to] define a non-Aboriginal Australian culture,' and how 'the land looms large in white Australian culture' (1). Despite his brief early engagement with the Jindyworobaks, McAuley continued to reject the idea of literary nationalism. While not 'objecting to the appearance of a distinctively Australian colouring in our poetry' he considered it 'a mark of the stultifying effect of the cultural climate that so many of our writers should become obsessed with Australianity as their object, subject and programme, and show an incapacity to deal with themes of permanent universal importance. It holds us back in the confines of *provincialism* instead of letting us progress to a healthy, normal *regionalism* ('The Grinning Mirror,' 1955, 67). Writing, he argued, should relate to the place where one lives, without preconceptions: 'One lives here' (Thompson interview, 1967, 97). McAuley here was objecting to a superficiality inherent in the preoccupation at that time with Australian themes and motifs of earth, topography and wildlife, in the face of the grand issues he had encountered in *Quiros.* I link this to his critique, at that time, of what he called the 'English Malady'—'that ideas do not matter, that civilisation can be maintained without intellectual commitments . . .and incidentally that literature can flourish on talent and sensibility alone'('Notes and Speculations,' 1958, 177).

Returning to the physical and its symbolic, I draw attention to an early 1960s poem in which McAuley uses earth as an agricultural metaphor linked with primitive, agricultural pre-Christian fertility rites:

> We too have lain in the furrow
> And made fertile the field; . . .
> Time's terraces we tilled . . .
> ('Summers' Close' 1964, *CP* 190)

Earth, as the realm of darkness, the unconscious, the funereal, and chthonic can also be the locus of creative rebirth, in the way the cave can host the oracle. In a postscript to his 1958 essay 'Notes and Speculations' McAuley meditates on the cicada as emblematic of the poet, falling from the tree to burial in the 'dark underground' until its creative resurgence or rebirth for passionate song:

> Cicada. An emblem of the poet. Born on the Tree of Life, his life-course requires that he fall from the branch and go into the dark underground. There, for perhaps many years he lies hidden, feeling at the very roots of things, until an upward impulse sends him at last forcing his way into the heavy earth until he returns to the sun and air. There he sheds his skin and soon with vibrant body and head like a dance-mask and glistening transparent wings his passionate song clangs and throbs though light and darkness. In the centre of his forehead he bears the small triple jewel of natural wisdom: the clustered three ocelli, signifying the powers of Pleasure, Understanding and Love. . . . ('Notes and Speculations' 180)

Seamus Heaney, whose poetry has much to do with earth, also touches on the earthly locus of creative transformation in his poem 'North' (c. 1975): 'Lie down in the word-hoard, burrow /

the coil and gleam / of your furrowed brain / . . .Compose in darkness / Expect borealis . . .' (*New and Selected Poems* 57).

McAuley's pervasive philosophical quest for 'reality' evident from his earliest work and especially in his long Quiros poem, saw also a search for a greater realism, and encounter with the everyday in style, diction and subject matter, including a greater concreteness and particularity. This can be seen in his turn during the 1960s from the neoclassical to the short confessional poem about life in the suburbs, and his sympathy with the informal rhetoric of Philip Larkin. There is no space to document here but the shift is marked by his growing critical appreciation of the 'realistic texture' of the work of late-eighteenth century poet George Crabbe ('The Languages of Poetry' 58). McAuley still points to Crabbe in the preface to his 1971 *Collected Poems,* (vii) adverting, for his own poetics, to what Crabbe described in the preface to his *Tales* (1812) as recognising 'the painful realities of actual existence.'

McAuley's late-found master, the decadent expressionist Austrian poet Georg Trakl, who died young in 1914 from an overdose during military service, brought, as Eliot had once done, an inspiring reencounter with a kind of dirty realism, using a number of images of human, natural and material debris (dung, the viscerality of rural life, blood/miscarriage/death, abbatoirs). McAuley thought Trakl's 'main vision of everyday degradation . . . impressively disgusting and unmistakably original' ('Poetry of Trakl' 213). McAuley's own poetry from the 1970s, perhaps reinforced by the discovery of a life-threatening cancer, is threaded with disturbing visual and aural references to rubbish, pollution, the jarring noise of traffic, as can be seen in 'Wet Day' (1970):

> . . . The water is glaucous-green and mauve and grey.
>
> . . . A child stands in a yellow mackintosh.
> Gulls lift away and circle round about.
> Cans, bottles, and junk appear as the tide runs out.
> Wind cannot sweep away nor water wash
>
> The dreck of our vulgarity. I think
> The world has never been redeemed; at least
> The marks it bears are mostly of the Beast —
> The broken trust, the litter and the stink. (*CP* 222–23)

As well as through its concrete images, the strength of disillusion is reinforced through the rancorous terminology of McAuley's Catholic mythology (the Beast). The motifs of debris in these dystopian late poems show McAuley on the margins of an ecocritical awareness. Slavoj Žižek argues how environmentalists should love, not just confront, even the scatological elements of their world (*Examined Life*, 2008). McAuley was not entirely against such an approach: his 1970s late period poem 'Tailings' shows his poetic *persona* fossicking for agates and other detritus: 'searching the dumps in hope / Of amethyst, citrine quartz,' though barely reconciled to finding 'a bottle / Dark-green, sixty years old; / Wondering if it was kero / Or wine it used to hold' (*CP* 214–215). His dump fossicker could be in Haraway's marginal wastelands, but while interested in the history of the old bottle, still seems haunted by the lost option of the amethyst, just as, as a poet, McAuley favoured lucidity over muddiness.

McAuley's late perspective was not all of disgust or rancour. In a stronger alternative voice he offers a poetics of close description of the nature and landscapes of the Coles Bay region of

east coast Tasmania he had come to know and love. We see a humble attitude, greater 'connectivity' (Haraway 19), with the poetic subject on his knees, unselfconsciously poking into small worlds, a spider's nest ('Wolf-Spider's Nest' (CP 94, 300), or peering at lichen on an ancient crag ('Granite Boulder' (*CP* 94, 299). Arguably the poet was working towards what Rosemary Dobson saw as the Jindyworobak goal of improving the 'level of descriptive writing in Australia.' (377). I refer briefly to the poem 'Bush Scene' below, one of McAuley's last written in 1974–75:

> Harsh, dry. Abrasive, spiky, rough,
> Untidy, tattered, irregular:
> Beauty is not a word you'd choose
> For what's most characteristic here.
> . . . By no mean is it [the bush] a *locus amoenus*
> In which imagination finds
> Man's paradisal garden or park.
> Less easy attractions hold the mind.
> Of all these varied eucalypts
> Choose one . . .—this one; and let the eye
> Explore . . .
>
> A balance of asymmetries . . .
> (*CP* 94, 301–02)

'Bush Scene' is among 17 poems or sketches of a field naturalist, almost absent of self, delineating, differentiating, but also celebrating a local, definitively spiky, asymmetrical, dryland landscape. The poet addresses in this late poem the ongoing difficulty of accommodating in the Australian landscape 'the aesthetic of the picturesque' (Kane 13). While not ignoring prevalent European stereotypes about what beauty (a concept resurrected from the early poem 'Envoi') or a *locus amoenus* ('splendid place' or place of comfort and safety) might be, the poem deflects and allows the discerning observant 'eye' (or 'I') to move in a different direction. It asserts the claim and right of the local and the regional to their own more modest, if untidy, tattered sites of meaningful place in nature's out-of-the-way places.

Conclusion

In her anthropological study Mary Douglas describes cultural associations between dirt, uncleanness and disorder. The variant motifs and symbolism of dirt, earth and disorder (or alternatively, richness) recur persistently and significantly through McAuley's work to an unexpected degree. While McAuley enters fully into the spirit of anarchist dirty modernism in his early poetry, which also takes up and disputes European perceptions about an Australian grubby nature in 'Envoi,' he grapples later in more conventional terms, following his absorption of Catholic reading post-conversion, with moral questions of societal disorder in his dystopian middle period poem *Captain Quiros*, in Quiros's pre-Enlightenment despair about civilisation—humankind's 'old selves' reducing 'the streams of Eden to a standing ditch' (*CP* 113). But *Quiros* also foresees the possibility of a greater chance locally for escape for 'estranged' humankind through the influence of beneficent 'nature [taking] refuge in their hearts' (*CP* 175). Even though McAuley's work belongs to an earlier epoch, the broader moral concern expressed in *Quiros* and associated prose writing also encompasses and anticipates the ecocritical stance of care in his urging of housekeeping, responsibility (Haraway's 'response-ability' 28), the need for measures, even 'unseen,' towards 'the hallowing of creatures, the

redintegration of a damaged reality' ('Notes and Speculations'168). Earth, even its symbolic representation of burial, is perceived as a sphere of fertility, essential to the poet's transformation and nourishment. In his later poems, the poet comes 'down to earth' significantly from his earlier global and historical perspectives, disillusioned by the behaviour of polluting vandals, less comforted by his Catholic faith, but nonetheless reconciled to rummaging about, or 'worlding,' in the untidy bush of Coles Bay in east coast Tasmania. As variation to the worn-out landscapes of a European '*locus amoenus*,' the texture of disorderly spiky nature in his late poem 'Bush Scene' (*CP* 94, 301–02) is offered, in a gesture of surreptitious post-colonial defiance but also realism, as a vital, honest and meritorious alternative for celebration as the new local. The realism, descriptive particularity and earthiness of McAuley's late work and parts of *Quiros* continue to offer interesting material for ecocritical readings.

NOTES

[1] McAuley passed through an anarchist phase from the late 1930s until 1942.
[2] Mary Douglas describes rituals of purification, such as hand-washing before meals in Jewish and Hindu traditions but sees them more broadly as ordering rituals that put things in place, as a means of reparation (*Purity and Danger*, Chapter 2).

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