



'A cold coming we had of it': the reception of Eliot, Literary Modernism and Tradition in the work of James McAuley and the Sydney Modernists

Michael Ackland

LONG before F.R. Leavis began to cast a deep shadow over the sacred wood of Australian academe, T.S. Eliot had emerged as a major influence on local undergraduates. From the mid-1930s, his literary star was in the ascendancy among young, aspiring poets, eager to put themselves in contact with the new movements that were shaping European and American culture. Australia at the time was approximately two decades behind these cosmopolitan centres in its reception of avant-garde ideas. Until well after the Second World War, Impressionism was the last international movement to spawn a comparable, and roughly contemporaneous local response in the visual arts. Australia, although not spared the slaughter of the trenches on the Western front, had missed out on the enforced diaspora of leading European artists, like Duchamp and Picabia, which meant that Zurich and Manhattan developed as independent centres of Dada, while here local artists continued tamely to paint bush and rural settings. Hence, too, the famous 1913 Armory show in Manhattan, which introduced New Yorkers to modern trends in art, did not have its local counterpart until the 1939 *Herald* art exhibition toured major centres and inspired predictable complaints of degeneracy and incomprehensibility. The howling of the philistine dingoes was particularly

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loud and long in Sydney and Melbourne, and the general public obdurate in remaining enamoured with bush ballads, *Bulletin*-sponsored writers and Hans Heysen gum-trees. When the outbreak of World War Two prevented the return of loan works by Cezanne, Matisse, Gauguin and others, Australian galleries, instead of profiting from the unexpected windfall to show these paintings, as New York's Museum of Modern Art would do by serving as a temporary custodian of Picasso's 'Guernica', buried them in the storage rooms of the New South Wales Art Gallery, like contaminated, dangerous material.

The printed word, however, was a cheaper, mass-produced and more transportable commodity. Whereas modern art masterpieces were available here, at best, in shrunken, black and white reproductions in a handful of prohibitively expensive art-books, an eager acolyte or apprentice poet could spend a few hours in a public library transcribing works by Eliot or Pound, as Harold Stewart did in Sydney, and circulate them among the like-minded for avid discussion. The presence of such Modernist, trend-setting works could, of course, easily inspire mere theft or awed silence (how can one compete with such a master?), but more positively it could be richly stimulating. In what follows, I wish to trace first this general dilemma of isolation and belatedness, as outlined in Peter Carey's most recent novel, *Theft*, then the various ways in which Modernism, as exemplified by T.S. Eliot, proved to be enabling in the career of one of Australia's most controversial and influential post-war literary figures, James McAuley.

Theft, although subtitled 'A Love Story', is also a novel about artistic deprivation in the antipodes and strategies for overcoming it. Its two main characters, and lovers, the abstract expressionist, Butcher Bones, and the New York gallery *aficionada*, Marlene Leibovitz, are both products of the cultural emptiness and amnesia that has traditionally marked life in Australian suburbia and country communities. Bones' moment of realisation about what this has meant bears quoting at length:

As we walked down Greenwich Street, with a bitter wind whipping off the Hudson, sheets of newspaper lifting into the lonely air like seagulls, Marlene made herself small beneath my arm and . . . I understood exactly

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how she created herself, how she, like I, had entered a world which she should never have been allowed into, the same world Amberstreet [a New South Wales policeman] crept into when he nicked the piece of paper off Bill de Kooning's floor.

We had been born walled out from art, had never guessed it might exist, until we slipped beneath the gate or burned down the porter's house, or jemmied the bathroom window, and then we saw what had been kept from us, in our sleep-outs, in our outside dunnies, our drafty beer-hoppy public bars, and then we went half mad with joy.

We had lived not knowing that Van Gogh was born, or Vermeer or Holbein, or dear sad Max Beckmann, but once we knew, then we staked our lives on theirs.¹

The lure of Modernist originality is irresistible, while the antipodean sense of being 'walled out', or profoundly deprived, has until comparatively recently been immense. Even the detective doggedly investigating the theft of a major twentieth-century canvas cannot resist purloining, or nicking, a de Kooning sketch. More elaborately, each of the main protagonists sets out to appropriate the Modernist legacy after their own fashion: Bones by painting his own Jackson-Pollock-like canvases, Marlene by gaining influence over, and then ownership of the Leibovitz *droit moral*, or power of authoritative authentication of the master's art works. Crucially the degrees of theft, appropriation, and inspired creativity are numerous, as Carey dramatises, and James McAuley showed through his own even more dramatic career half a century earlier.

The precise circumstances surrounding McAuley's discovery of Eliot are unknown. Carey's *Butcher Bones* confesses: 'it was sheer chance that we stumbled onto what would be the obsession of our untidy hurtful lifes'.² McAuley's encounter was presumably equally unplanned – although undoubtedly linked with his attendance at the elite government institution, Fort Street Boys High School. It offered gifted teachers and an environment open to advanced, at times challenging ideas, as well as a school magazine in which to display newly acquired skills and esoteric knowledge. Here, by 1934, McAuley and fellow student Harold Stewart were overawing peers with literary aspirations, like the young Amy Witting, with their grasp of such innovators as Eliot, and of such sources



of Imagism as classical Chinese and Japanese verse. In June of that year, for instance, Stewart published a poem in the school magazine entitled 'The Empty Room', with the subtitle: 'A Fantasy on a Line from T.S. Eliot'. Heavy with existential anguish, it equates life with obdurate, inescapable pain, with 'heap[s] of shattered mirrors, shattered dreams', with empty, Prufrock-like social rites and ominous *memento mori* akin to those in *The Waste Land*: 'Hurry up, please, it's time' (etc). In the same issue of *The Fortian*, a precocious McAuley offered his first published survey of the field of contemporary verse in 'Some Aspects of Modern Poetry'. There, Eliot is singled out as 'the most significant poet writing at the present day', and Modernism defined in terms of attributes he would savage years later: as a quest for originality at all costs. 'It means that everything is risked for the sake of experiment; it means that a profound horror of having his originality tainted and enfeebled by outworn modes of expression leads him to make daring experiments with his art, in order to open up new subjects and new methods. Everything is risked that much might be gained'.³ Moreover, as apprentice poets, both McAuley and Stewart were acutely aware of the influence exerted on their fledgling works by their Modernist poetic masters – an influence that threatened to be indelible. Stewart, in a mock note to his 'Water Images', acknowledged the debt of some its lines to Pound's *Cathay* (June 1934), while McAuley, writing under pseudonyms in ensuing years, would occasionally arraign himself for obvious lapses into telltale Eliotisms.

The decisive phase of their engagement with Eliot came at Sydney University where McAuley, in the student magazine *Hermes*, spoke in 1937 of the debt of 'our generation as a whole' to the expatriate American poet. This claim was hardly an exaggeration, at least not from the vantage-point of the pages of *Hermes*. Small coteries at Australia's few universities were, at the time, among the local vanguard determined to 'make it new'. Their efforts, however, were not always well received either by the larger community or their own peers. In Adelaide, fellow students sent Max Harris for an impromptu swim in the River Torrens. In Sydney, the student union threatened repeatedly to withdraw funds from *Hermes*, and so put an end to its interminable, incomprehensible, and self-aggrandising



poetic drivel. Sydney University in the 1930s, with hindsight, played a role much like that of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in the early 1900s. Just as this venerable Ivy League institution was the meeting ground of Ezra Pound, H.D. and William Carlos Williams, so the Sydney quad hosted dynamic encounters and the steep learning trajectories of local poets such as McAuley, Dorothy Green (then Dorothy Auchterlonie), A.D. Hope and Harold Stewart. They, of course, were the beneficiaries of the efforts of the University of Pennsylvania group to remake English verse tradition, and they proved apt as well as idiosyncratic scholars – though it was McAuley as critic, poet, notorious hoaxer, polemicist and editor of *Quadrant* who would have the most lasting impact on Australian letters.

McAuley, although much maligned decades later as an arch-enemy of poetic experimentation, was a keen proselytiser for Eliot on the Sydney campus between 1935 and 1937. There, stark battle-lines had been drawn between parochial literary nationalism and cosmopolitan, experimental vistas. A major focus for this debate was *Hermes* which, as early as the editorship of Howard Daniels in 1933, had boldly profiled itself as an organ for the new and iconoclastic. 'Show me the undergraduate interested in poetry who has no adequate knowledge of modern verse', thundered Daniels, 'and I will show you a man who has not adjusted to his environment'. Critics of *Hermes* countered with charges of wilful obscurity, intellectual pomposity and shocking taste. McAuley, first as contributor, then editor, as well as Dorothy Green, maintained the good fight against student prejudice until Pearl Harbour, when the regimentation and mind-policing they had long struggled against finally swept all before it in a wave of khaki jingoism.

T.S. Eliot, with his uncompromising allusiveness and trans-national perspectives, became a contentious touchstone in this debate, as emerges in a McAuley editorial from early in 1937 entitled 'Less of it'. There Eliot, serving as a metonym for the new and for artistic freedom of theme and technique, is played off against 'Inky' Stephensen, well-known critic, unabashed nationalist and former literary editor of the *Bulletin*, who stands for the local literary establishment:



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Literary nationalism, the theory that the artist should sit and write on his own dunghill, is being hawked about Sydney once more.

At any time it is one of the least charming of bourgeois theories of art, but in this instance it has been yoked to that horrid bedfellow, political nationalism. It is expected to aid in the rousing of that patriotic fervour, that ecstatic consciousness of whatever racial characteristics our public speakers tell us we have, which is an essential ingredient in the fascist stew. Whether or not fascism is the intention, a nationalistic democracy is unstable, and will topple over into the iron pot sooner or later.

But to return to our business, it was a sad day in Sydney when Mr. P.R. Stephensen decided to spread the nationalist heresy amongst the literati. In 'The Publicist' (January 1, 1937), he writes:-

'All you readers of T.S. Eliot suffer from literariness. Australian literature, in fact, has suffered severely from literariness whenever it has tried to get away from Steele Rudd. The flight to Europe by so many of our best writers has been a flight towards literariness, not a flight towards literature. If they had stayed in their own country, and aroused a sense of Australian reality in the brainpans of the Australian citizenry, our emigres would have created a finer literature here than they have created there.' (It is interesting to note that T.S. Eliot himself, 'the prophet from Boston,' has succumbed to similar sentiments in *After Strange Gods*.)⁴

Stephensen is at once the voice of the past and a portent of the darkening present. Although the fictional world depicted by Steele Rudd had been long surpassed by developments in communications, industry and transport, Rudd's Dad and Dave and their homespun rural virtues were still being held up for literary emulation, in an Australian variant on '*Blut und Boden*' which McAuley rightly identified as one of the intellectual paths leading to fascism. Instead, *Hermes'* editor advocates the right of literary creativity to assume diverse forms according to individual temperament, needs and models, and enjoins budding authors to follow his independent lead 'without being unduly disturbed by the confused quacking noises that issue from the local barnyard'.⁵

As McAuley underscores in this editorial and demonstrates in his undergraduate work, imitation is a necessary element of 'literary adolescence', but ideally only as a means to emancipation. and self-



discovery. The poise and polemical punch of *Quadrant's* later editor are already foreshadowed in 1937:

Mr. Stephensen's attempt to show the young artist what he ought to do is linked with the sort of criticism of Hermes which appears in Honi Soit. We are told that the contributions are just imitations of current literature, of the Imagists, Eliot, Sitwell, Hemingway and the rest. Let it be stated here and now that there never was an artist who was not derivative and imitative. Those whom we imitate stand in the relation of a family to us. We develop inside their culture, experimenting with their technique, their way of treating things, until finally we come to age and have our own latch-key.⁶

This truism also applies to McAuley. From the outset his apprenticeship to Eliot had been intellectual as well as prosodic, so that at Fort Street he was already steeping himself in *The Golden Bough* and the French symbolists. At university his private reading, often Eliot-inspired, helped bring him into conflict with the Sydney English Department, and with Andersonian aesthetics, then dominant on campus. In addresses to Anderson's Literary Society, for example, McAuley underlined how the philosopher's aesthetic theory failed to account for verse like Donne's or Eliot's, where disparate ideas, mental conflict and varied effects of wit are used tellingly to present 'psychological problems' and 'a breakdown of traditional beliefs'.⁷ Hence McAuley could claim with justice that 'John Anderson taught so many of us to think', but that he himself was only 'an Andersonian... with reservations',⁸ for like his alternative Boston mentor he was more concerned with symbolic than rational forms of expression, and defended authors as idiosyncratic and difficult as Donne and Blake to Anderson's avid disciples.

Poetically, McAuley appropriated, echoed and fused diverse elements from Eliot's *oeuvre*, as in three *Hermes* pieces from 1936 headed 'Preludes'. Whereas Eliot's similarly entitled works depict a desolate world with stark emotional correlatives, McAuley's trio focuses on an intensely threatening psychological state, played out in the tower of selfhood:

*In the mid dark, and batblind hour,
No airs invade the ivory tower,
Walls crumble, faces blur,
Footsteps fade on crumblestair,*



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*Words lose meaning, meaning words.
Dawn eddies in the ivory tower.
Dawn is more terrible than dark,
Wan light to show the mind's selfstare.
What terrorgaps and dreamfogs lurk
In airless batblind upper dark
At the grim, daunting hour
When words fail in the ivory tower?*

This state is marked by blindness, chaos, lifeless fragments and 'no potency': 'That which was left undone, / Though well begun, / Unfinished, finished ill'.⁹ Although reminiscent of the shadow falling between impulse and action in 'The Hollow Men', it is a 'family' resemblance, not a slavish one, and evidence that McAuley was well on the way to coming of age as a poet, although he was still in quest of a distinctive voice as well as an intellectual demesne.

Able as editor to place work in *Hermes* at will, he published in 1937 a survey of Eliot's work to date and his attitude to it in a five-page essay, titled 'The Journey of the Magus'. Eliot's response to the 'modern confusion of our time', according to McAuley, 'is undoubtedly religious, but it expresses itself in the widest form as a search for a "tradition", for a spiritual and cultural home within which he can work'.¹⁰ Its earliest manifestations up to *The Waste Land* are applauded, whereas the so-called 'gush of hope' that marks *Ash-Wednesday* and the *Ariel Poems* is seen as a weakening of impulse, again in evidence in 'Burnt Norton'. This latest orientation confirms the reader in his view that the more complete 'the religious absorption', the more detrimental it is to his art. At the time McAuley was a notorious freethinker and sometime atheist, and certainly unable to foresee his own later embrace of Catholicism when he concluded: 'It is a melancholy reflection, but in the main a true one, that the more a poet becomes reconciled with Catholicism the more his art suffers' (15). Nevertheless, despite this alleged failing of Eliot, McAuley acknowledges an abiding indebtedness:

I, personally, owe more than I can calculate to the stimulus of his poetry, and of our generation as a whole it may be said that the debt to Eliot is often greatest where it is least acknowledged. I can remember vividly my first



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acquaintance with his poetry. I opened 'Poems 1909-1925' in a cafe and looked at 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' The first few lines were an Italian quotation which I could not translate and still cannot, and I read on with very mixed feelings, only half catching the significance of this new technique, until I came on three lines expressing an image which I had 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?¹¹*

This essay is evidently both a studied act of self-profiling, as well as a vigorous rattling of the 'latch key' of literary maturity. Much as the stilted prose of his *Fortian* essays has been shed for the genial sophistication of *Hermes'* editor, so his school-boy self has been replaced by his current university persona as archetypal Modernist café-habitué. Sydney may not have had a Left Bank culture, but it had an inveterate self-dramatiser in the great Romantic tradition, arrogating to himself the role of bold explorer, launching out unaided to discover in Eliot a modern Copernicus who had reconfigured the poetic heavens. The authenticity of the admiration, however, together with later qualifications felt about Eliot, are hardly to be doubted:

From then on I was a convinced disciple of Eliot. The Waste Land threw a bright light on my own boyish attempts to explain the world to myself. In the end I came to profoundly disagree with Eliot's attitude, but my opinion of his poetry has never altered. Here, if anywhere in modern literature, is real competence, an artistic excellence of a kind which the moderns often talk about but are rarely willing to submit to the discipline necessary to obtain.

By 1937, McAuley, in Sydney circles at least, had acquired a kind of 'droit moral', or role, if not of authentication, then pontification over the legacy of Eliot. And he used it with relish, though with a frequency that diminished with each passing decade as he developed his own stubbornly individual positions on politics and literature. Nevertheless, Eliot had been an immensely enabling influence. He had helped McAuley and his peers break decisively with the trite literary nationalism of 'Inky'



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Stephensen and other local doyens. Eliot's example had encouraged them to experiment with new verse forms and to delve into alien traditions, and had given them a cosmopolitan vantage-point from which to assess their own parochial country, and societies obdurately bent on rehearsing the devastating ruptures of the Great War. As a new world war approached, McAuley felt he had done with Eliot. In a Master's thesis, submitted in 1940, which offers a synoptic overview of poetic symbolism, Eliot is only referred to briefly as a major proponent of the 'objective correlative' and as an heir of the symbolists. Two years later McAuley and Harold Stewart would launch the Ern Malley poems, a hoax aimed not so much at Modernism as at surrealist pretensions, and at a consequent lack of organising principles in much current poetry. Thereafter, McAuley, like his former mentor Eliot, would seek his own version of a sustaining intellectual and spiritual tradition, finding it first in the esoteric, syncretic lore of the so-called Traditionalists, headed by Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon, before coming to rest in the arms of the Catholic Church – though by then he chose not to highlight parallels between his own and Eliot's trajectories. But Eliot remained an exemplar of artistic excellence, competence and intense discipline against which McAuley would continue to measure his own productions, and the works of others whom he would be instrumental in publishing during the intellectually acrimonious decades of the Cold War.

Notes

- 1 Peter Carey, *Theft: A Love Story* (Knopf, New York, 2006), pp.227-8.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.229.
- 3 June 1934, p.24
- 4 *Hermes* 43.1 (1937), 37.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 From an address on 'Metaphysical Poetry' of 19 June, reported in the *Union Recorder*, 2 July 1936, 126.
- 8 Respectively: McAuley interview with Tony Morphett, ABC Transcripts, Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), p. 4, and his interview with Catherine Santamaria, NLA TRC 876, p. 14.
- 9 'Preludes', *Hermes* 42.3 (1936), 25.
- 10 *Hermes* 43.1 (1937), 12.
- 11 *Hermes* 43.[?] (Lent Term) (1937), 16.

