

Classic Poetry Series

James Phillip McAuley
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

James Phillip McAuley(12 October 1917 – 15 October 1976)

James Phillip McAuley was an Australian academic, poet, journalist, literary critic and a prominent convert to Roman Catholicism.

Life and career

McAuley was born in Lakemba, a suburb of Sydney. He was educated at Fort Street High School and then attended Sydney University where he majored in English, Latin and philosophy. In 1937 he edited *Hermes*, the annual literary journal of the University of Sydney Union, in which many of his early poems were published until 1941.

He began his life as an Anglican and was sometime organist and choirmaster at Holy Trinity Church, Dulwich Hill in Sydney. McAuley lost his Christian faith as a younger man.

In 1943 McAuley was commissioned as a lieutenant in the militia for the Australian Army, and served in Melbourne (DORCA) and Canberra. After the war he also spent time in New Guinea, which he regarded as his second "spiritual home".

McAuley came to prominence in the wake of the 1945 Ern Malley hoax. With fellow poet, Harold Stewart, McAuley concocted sixteen nonsense poems in a pseudo-experimental modernist style. These were then sent to the young editor of the literary magazine *Angry Penguins*, Max Harris. The poems were raced to publication by Harris and Australia's most celebrated literary hoax was set in motion.

In 1952 he converted to Roman Catholicism, the faith his own father had abandoned. This was in the parish of St Charles at Ryde. He was later introduced to Australian musician Richard Connolly by a priest, Ted Kennedy, at the Holy Spirit parish at North Ryde and the two subsequently collaborated to produce between them the most significant collection of Australian Catholic hymnody to date, titled "Hymns for the Year of Grace". Connolly was McAuley's sponsor for his confirmation into the Roman Catholic Church. In his undergraduate years McAuley was influenced by both communism and anarchism, but although a man of the left, McAuley remained staunchly anti-communist throughout his later life. In 1956 he and Richard Krygier founded the literary and cultural journal,

Quadrant and was chief editor until 1963. From 1961 he was professor of English at the University of Tasmania.

A portrait of McAuley by Jack Carington Smith won the 1963 Archibald prize. James McAuley died of cancer in 1976, at the age of 59, in Hobart.

A Poem In Place Of A Lecture

<i>Or Vice-Versa</i>

This morning, friends, the blackboard will be black
Behind my skull: your eyelids will be slack,
And I could wearily cajole from you, or you,
Slow answers to dull questions; or grow annoyed
Earnestly deploying on the black void
Lyra's measured stars. But I must learn anew
To cope with darkness: these voids won't do
As palps where I could plot the dusty lore,
The diagrams, the arty emblems you ignore,
Your blood too thin to tick into the brain
The winged horse mustered from the sod
To be the Muses' pet, a demi-god
High in black heaven. I will not strain—
The chalk crumpling, your eyelids flickering—to explain
Why ignorant men pricked darkness full of scars
And gave them godly names, and called them stars.
You quench whole constellations on the black
Walls of your skulls; arts you dishonour die.
The sky will go black and Hippocrene run dry
Before I will fix one light in your blind skulls this black
Morning, friends. The blackboard will stay black.

James Phillip McAuley

At A Child's Grave

A sky contused and rifted like a wound:
Red-amber gum exudes from the dark tree;
A long day's dying. Small anatomy
Locked in this nameless grave's neglected mound,

You wait for nothing now but that wild sound
Of trumpets blowing doom and jubilee.
And if it came this instant, where would I flee,
Where hide my terror in the gaping ground,

What crack, what rift, what gulf would shelter me
And close me over never to be found
When the last hopeless wish is, not to be?

But little child you'd rise, and walk around,
And have a name again; beneath the tree
Of life you'd sit, with beams of glory crowned.

James Phillip McAuley

Because

My father and my mother never quarrelled.
They were united in a kind of love
As daily as the Sydney Morning Herald,
Rather than like the eagle or the dove.

I never saw them casually touch,
Or show a moment's joy in one another.
Why should this matter to me now so much?
I think it bore more hardly on my mother,

Who had more generous feelings to express.
My father had dammed up his Irish blood
Against all drinking praying fecklessness,
And stiffened into stone and creaking wood.

His lips would make a switching sound, as though
Spontaneous impulse must be kept at bay.
That it was mainly weakness I see now,
But then my feelings curled back in dismay.

Small things can pit the memory like a cyst:
Having seen other fathers greet their sons,
I put my childish face up to be kissed
After an absence. The rebuff still stuns

My blood. The poor man's curt embarrassment
At such a delicate proffer of affection
Cut like a saw. But home the lesson went:
My tenderness thenceforth escaped detection.

My mother sang Because, and Annie Laurie,
White Wings, and other songs; her voice was sweet.
I never gave enough, and I am sorry;
But we were all closed in the same defeat.

People do what they can; they were good people,
They cared for us and loved us. Once they stood
Tall in my childhood as the school, the steeple.

How can I judge without ingratitude?

Judgment is simply trying to reject
A part of what we are because it hurts.
The living cannot call the dead collect:
They won't accept the charge, and it reverts.

It's my own judgment day that I draw near,
Descending in the past, without a clue,
Down to that central deadness: the despair
Older than any hope I ever knew.

James Phillip McAuley

Credo

That each thing is a word
Requiring us to speak it;
From the ant to the quasar,
From clouds to ocean floor-

The meaning not ours, but found
In the mind deeply submissive
To the grammar of existence,
The syntax of the real;

So that alien is changed
To human, thing into thinking:
For the world's bare tokens
We pay golden coin,

Stamped with the king's image;
And poems are prophecy
Of a new heaven and earth,
A rumour of resurrection.

James Phillip McAuley

Durer: Innsbruck, 1495

I had often, cowed in the slumbrous heavy air,
Closed my inanimate lids to find it real,
As I knew it would be, the colourful spires
And painted roofs, the high snows glimpsed at the back
All reversed in the quiet reflecting waters –
Not knowing then that Durer perceived it too.
Now I find that once more I have shrunk
To an interloper, robber of dead men's dreams,
I had read in books that art is not easy
But no one warned that the mind repeats
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still
The black swan of trespass on alien waters.

James Phillip McAuley

Iris

Not how you would be thought of, your color
Being grey, silky, like a second skin, your hair
Flecked with it. Now, hearing your way of saying
Iridescent while I read your poem, three years
After your death, I am compelled to check
You out in Ovid, Lamprière, Bulfin, then
A book of flowers, where I discover you
On marshy ground, not grey exactly—in fact
A pretty blue-grey, a quiet type, with a green cowl
To shelter the thoughtful inclined head.

Not at all the bright-winged messenger
Who'd drown the world if Juno put you up to it,
But a quiet sylph, who could color her message
With a sly tilt of the head, those grey eyes steady,
Lips pursed, making a pretence of kissing.

You could supply so many ambiguities—
Gradations and streaks and tones of grey and blue—
That for twenty years I saw your story told
Where the sky lay on the wintry hills, weighed down
With tears Mnemosyne allows for you:
Flower, messenger, poet.

James Phillip McAuley

Magpie

The magpie's mood is never surly
every morning, wakening early,
he gargles music in his throat,
the liquid squabble of his throat.

Its silver stridencies of sound,
the bright confusions and the round
bell-cadences are pealed
over the frosty, half-ploughed field.

Then swooping down self confidently
from the fence-post or the tree,
he swaggers in pied feather coat,
and slips the fat worms down his throat.

James Phillip McAuley

Marginal Note

A ray of light, to an oblique observer,
Remains invisible in pure dry air;
But shone into a turbid element
It throws distracting side-gleams everywhere

And is diminished by what takes the eye.
So poetry that moves by chance collision
Scatters its brightness at each random mote
And mars the lucid order of its vision.

The purest meditation will appear
Faint or invisible to those who glance
Obliquely at its unreflected beam;

James Phillip McAuley

Meanwhile, In Another Part Of The War

On the street of the concrete refugee tenements
That have collapsed into the smoking holes
The Israeli rockets blew open at dawn's early light,
The sundered limbs and torsos of a Jenin family
Lie with the shards and dust of their household,
Three generations, shredded like paper dolls.

There are no heads to be found. They never had heads.
If they had heads, the Israeli spokesman assures
The State Department, the U.N., the Believers,
The CNN camera, with his shy smile, in
His Noo Yock twang, they wouldn't have been
Where the terrorists were.

"Of the three-month-old infant,
Crushed in its cradle, and the eighty-year-old
Shepherd who retired twenty years ago when Israelis
From Russia drove off his flock at gunpoint,
And his son's wife, and the schoolboy, all buried
In the holes the rockets made, which ones
Were the terrorists?" A voice off-camera asks.

But the spokesman shrugs and smiles
Shyly. The cameras and the microphones
Are already turned off.

There were survivors. One, some say
The mother of two victims, has volunteered
To take the bus to Jerusalem.

James Phillip McAuley

Pieta

A year ago you came
Early into the light.
You lived a day and night,
Then died; no one to blame.

Once only, with one hand,
Your mother in farewell
Touched you. I cannot tell,
I cannot understand

A thing so dark and deep,
So physical a loss:
One touch, and that was all

She had of you to keep.
Clean wounds, but terrible,
Are those made with the Cross.

James Phillip McAuley

Winter Morning

Spring stars glitter in the freezing sky,
Trees on watch are armoured with frost.
In the dark tarn of a mirror a face appears.
Time is moving through displacements.
Hungrily the blind earthworm burrows
Deeper into its night. Surely
Heaven must ache with all its vacancies.
A dog's howl is thrown up like a rope-trick.
It is an hour for prayer without words.

James Phillip McAuley