

*Translating Trakl: James McAuley's Encounter with the Cultural Other.*

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**Abstract:** Translation theorist Laurence Venuti has written how a translator, in “a Romantic transcendence” can lose “his national self through a strong identification with a cultural other.” *TS Reader*, 20) Australian twentieth-century poet James McAuley’s reading and translation of the early twentieth-century Austrian poet Georg Trakl presents a significant literary encounter. Cosmopolitan by nature, McAuley, as a young poet, had been drawn to, and translated, the German language lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). Few of McAuley’s translations of Trakl are included in his *Collected Poems* (1971 and 1994); they appear in a separate posthumous collection (1982) and in his essay “The Poetry of Georg Trakl” (1975). This article offers a literary appreciation of McAuley’s translations and his commentary on Trakl’s imagery, prosody, symbolism and world view which McAuley described, borrowing Baudelaire’s term, as “a landscape of the soul.” It considers the hypothesis of translation as travel. Drawing on Harold Bloom’s theory of influence it examines McAuley’s encounter with Trakl in his late work, translations and poetic dedication (“Trakl: Salzburg,” 1976) written after visiting Salzburg in 1973. A comparatist approach traces Trakl’s influence, the discovery of affinities or parallel paths with the earlier poet who might be considered, in Bloomian terms, to be McAuley’s “gnostic double.”

**Keywords:** translation, influence, travel, lyric.

James McAuley (1917-1976), regarded as one of the important Australian poets of the mid-to-late twentieth-century, remains a complex of seeming paradoxes; regarded as representing the “second wave of modernism” (letter H.M Green to McAuley, 15/3/44) in Australia in the 1940s, but predominantly as an anti-modernist, formalist poet, Catholic convert, and polemic critic. Reputed for a conservative neo-classicism linked with his apprehension of the “horrors of modernity” and his turn to the “dubious haven” of the church,<sup>i</sup> in Australia he is best known for his controversial antimodernist collaboration in the dazzling surrealist parody, the “Ern Malley” hoax poems of 1944, still a celebrated forerunner of Australian post-modernism. He is also admired, if less known, as one of the most “inward and subtle of Australian poets” (Bradley, 444). His return to his early lyric inwardness coincided with, and was reinforced by, his profound encounter with the poetry of Georg Trakl (1887- 1914) between 1970 and 1973.

### The short lyric: John Shaw Neilson and Georg Trakl

McAuley's late lyrics, written between 1970 and 1976, were widely acclaimed. They comprised the last sequence "The Hazard and the Gift" of *Collected Poems 1936-1970* (CP, 1971), *Music Late at Night: Poems 1970 to 1973* (MLN, 1976), *Time Given* (TG, 1976), and the posthumous *A World of its Own* (1977). These poems represent a highly productive period, of "more and better lyrical verse than I have written in my life" (letter to A.D. Hope, 11 November 1970). McAuley had emerged from a serious illness with cancer "with that exquisitely keen sense of life and its fragility which such experiences give" producing "a number of short poems which use a language of sense-impressions to render a sense of world" (*A Map of Australian Verse*, MAV, 204).

The poet explained his wish, during convalescence, to write a set of lyrical poems in honour of John Shaw Neilson, the untaught Australian lyric poet. They appear in the first half of "The Hazard and the Gift." McAuley concluded however that "Apart from one poem [. . .] Nothing would come as I wanted it to come. The muse [. . .] refused my intentions" [. . .] ("The Rhetoric of Australian Poetry," 116). The second group of thirteen poems in "The Hazard and the Gift" section of CP 1971 (220-226) reflects the stronger impact of his concurring encounter with the work of Georg Trakl, also evident in another twenty lyrics written from December 1970 until late 1973, published in *Music Late at Night: Poems 1970-73* (MLN). Literary biographer Peter Coleman observed how, "Now almost everything is evoked in symbols. [...] The bardic impulse does not appear but is incorporated within the lyric impulse" (1980 111-112).

McAuley had already translated Trakl in 1956, "Ein Winterabend" as "Winter Nightfall" (CP, 103) — an elegiac description of passage dedicated to the memory of his colleague Camilla Wedgwood, anthropologist at the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA). During his convalescence through 1970, his own encounter with mortality, McAuley wrote his second Trakl translation, of "Frauensegen" (1913), with the title "Blessing of Women" (CP, 220):

You move among your womenfolk  
Smiling often but oppressed,  
For the anxious days have come.  
Along the fence white poppies fade.

Like your body swollen ripe  
The grapes are golden on the slope.  
The pond reflects the sky's far height,  
And a scythe<sup>ii</sup> swishes in the field. (CP, 220)

Using imperfect rather than full rhyme in the translated version, this apostrophe to the farmer's wife presents a physical, homely rural world, constructed with colour (white "poppies," "golden" grapes, leaves "autumn red," even the farmer "brown as a Moor"), and sound (the onomatopoeic scythe which "clatters"). It presents a world in autumn, with figures at harvest, the pregnant woman ("Your body swollen ripe"), and the farmer, her husband. The absent subject is suggested in the address to the woman – "You" at the beginning of the poem and "your" (St.2). It celebrates an inhabited, natural world though signals the "anxious days" of life's uncertainty (St.1) accentuated by the symbolism of the scythe. Such pictorial style, using colour and sound to denote affect, can be seen entering McAuley's work.

A similar detached, visual and sonorous intensity can be detected in McAuley's poem "St John's Park" (1970) which coincides with his first translation. A dream-like detachment vividly describes a world in present tense: "[. . .] A dark-green gum bursts out in crimson flowers" a flourishing which contrasts with decay: "Old people slowly rot along the wall./ The young ones hardly notice them at all. /Both live in the same picture-book of hours [. . .]" (CP, 222). This visual landscape of McAuley's neighbourhood in New Town, near Hobart (Tasmania), beginning in stillness – the medieval "picture book of hours" (St. 2) – sets a contrast with "the screaming brakes" (CP, 222) of an implied, depleted modernity. While its tactile physical sense may have drawn from Trakl, the evolving style was also honed out of the heightened sensitivity of illness and McAuley's established preference for a "concrete particularity" (*The Personal Element in Australian Poetry*, 4). The poet associated such highly visual poems with the place where he walked during convalescence: "[. . .] In that ill state I was very alive and sensitive to the external world [...]" (Kinross Smith, 319). The space in which McAuley was living and walking, with its familiar universal images, was becoming place, through regular evocation and naming. New Town, Hobart, starts to come to life in the sense of Thomas Hardy's "genius loci" (*Jude the Obscure*, 98).

### Reading, writing, translating Trakl

McAuley's encounter with the Austrian poet in 1970 was the second, but deeper, poetic meeting of McAuley's convalescence, following that with Neilson. It involved textual and imaginary encounter, and also translations and a visit to Trakl's native Austria. This article examines McAuley's translations or versions of Trakl, written between mid-to-late 1970 and July 1973, together with parallel poems written in dialogue with Trakl, to identify what McAuley may have learnt from or recognised in the Austrian poet, including any commonality or differences in themes, motifs, diction, form, rhetoric, *personae*, and world-view. This includes in the light of comparisons already made<sup>iii</sup> but principally by McAuley himself in his essay "The Poetry of Georg Trakl" (1975). The essay refers to a brief literary encounter with the Austrian poet's work between 1956 and 1960: "[...] it was not till nearly 10 years later, in 1970 in a period of convalescence, that with the aid of a commentator<sup>iv</sup> I began to learn Trakl's difficult personal language and realize his achievement" (*The Grammar of the Real*, GR, 203). As Catalano has remarked, McAuley's essay is a "primer on the work of both poets, for a number of the observations he makes about Trakl's poetry can also be applied to his own" (1996 136). The translations cited are taken from McAuley's 1975 essay, based on his 8 July 1973 ABC Radio broadcast and collected in the 1982 posthumous publication *Georg Trakl*.

While McAuley considered Trakl's poems difficult to translate, Tasmanian poet Gwen Harwood, who understood German, considered McAuley to have "caught the tone" of Trakl (Intro. *Georg Trakl*). Poet and translator Keith Harrison considered "remarkable" (2005 53) McAuley's earlier 1938 translation "Autumn" (CP, 5) from German of Rilke's "Herbsttag," but did not comment on, or perhaps know, his Trakl translations. This study accepts McAuley's poems as his interpretation of the Austrian poet's work but does not assess the quality of his translation. Such an assessment would be invaluable.<sup>v</sup> A handwritten note with glossaries and synonyms in German suggests McAuley received some interpretation help in preparing his translations, but none of McAuley's translation drafts has survived. He knew less German than French; his university friend Joan Fraser (and later novelist and poet, Amy Witting) had helped with his 1938 translation of Rilke.

Georg Trakl was an Austrian expressionist poet who struggled with drug addiction, an apparently incestuous relationship with his sister Grete (a talented pianist) and died of a possibly suicidal overdose at the beginning of World War I (*GR*, 205). McAuley noted the traces of early twentieth-century decadence in Trakl's work but preferred: "[...] the first half of his mature period [...]: some fifty [...] well-formed lyrics of extraordinary, intense, inward and mysterious beauty, unease, disgust and suffering dread" (202).<sup>vi</sup> McAuley considered them "perhaps the finest poetry written in our century" (202).<sup>vii</sup> He was attracted, in his first translation, of "Ein Winterabend" (1913-15) as "Winter Nightfall" (*CP*, 103), to the poem's simplicity but "controlled ambiguity" (*GR*, 203). Similar praise for the poem had been expressed by Martin Heidegger in his 1950 essay "Language."<sup>viii</sup> McAuley's later general observations identify how Trakl creates a powerfully felt world in which the subject often transforms into the landscapes and its figures:

These poems are beautifully shaped lyrics that mingle sound and colour in a way I cannot hope to render in translation. They are set in a recognizable place and construct a recognizable situation out of a relatively small number of elements. [...] There is often a solitary figure moving through the landscape, walking, listening, seeing. [...] Nothing much happens. But the scene, apparently so simple, becomes charged with meaning. It is a landscape of the soul, of the divided soul in torment and longing. (*GR*, 207)

The expression, "It is a landscape of the soul," is from Baudelaire, ("[...] paysage d' âme [...]")<sup>ix</sup> a term cited much earlier in McAuley's 1940 Master's thesis in describing the French symbolist's technique for constructing lyrics. McAuley's reading of Trakl, during his lonely convalescent walks, places him doubly in the role of wanderer; he is an older *flâneur* than in his first encounter with Rilke's Parisian-inspired "Herbsttag" in his tender encounter with his immediate, newly fragile world and with Trakl's.

The Trakl translations include one sonnet translated as "Decay" and 10 short-lined poems, usually quatrains from three to four stanzas. McAuley's Trakl-influenced poems follow the short quatrains of Trakl's "early mature" period, though McAuley already favoured that form. In "In Autumn," McAuley's translation of Trakl's short poem "Im Herbst" 1913, he employs Trakl's characteristic end-stopped line:

The sunflowers are bright along the fence.  
Sick people are sitting out in the sunshine.  
In the field the women [sing]<sup>x</sup> at their toil,  
Into which falls the ringing of cloister-bells. [ . . . ]

People there appear joyful and mild.  
Today the tawny wine is being pressed.  
The rooms where death comes are open wide  
And brightly painted with the sunshine. (*GR*, 222-223)

McAuley's translation uses the musical repetition of: "Today the tawny wine is being pressed." In the difficult task of translation different forms of rhyme are used to evoke Trakl's originals (fence/bells, bells/pressed, mild/wide.) The motif of "sick people sitting in the sunshine" later linked to "The rooms where death comes [...] brightly painted with the sunshine" is echoed in McAuley's poem, the above-mentioned Traklean "St John's

Park” – “Old people slowly rot along the wall [...] The old have crept inside to meet the dark” (CP, 222).

The “village” terrain of McAuley’s local walks to the St John’s church precinct, with its old people’s home and orphanage seems reminiscent of the integrated rural Christian world of villages, churches, vineyards, fields and hospitals, of the Trakl translations. The invisible “you” subject (“the solitary figure moving through the landscape” GR, 207) appears in the first line of St.2 of “In Autumn”: “The birds tell you news from far away” (GR, 223). Gwen Harwood remarked on a physical presence in McAuley’s “profoundly beautiful and disturbing” translations of Trakl, and arguably, the quality of Trakl’s poem themselves:

You have entered into Trakl’s world as if you lived there physically. I don’t feel these poems are a recreation; they give the uncanny feeling that you are there [...] quite simply moving about in it and speaking from it [...] (unpublished letter to McAuley, 25 May 1975)

McAuley’s description of the “interplay of positive and negative in a value-charged landscape” (GR, 214) is evident in the paradoxical last lines of “In Autumn”: “The rooms where death comes are open wide/And brightly painted with the sunshine” (223).

McAuley’s poem of two rhyming quatrains in iambic pentameters, “Nocturne”, written in rural Bruny Island, South-Eastern Tasmania, during summer 1972 when he was translating Trakl, displays a similarly arresting physicality in establishing Trakl’s admired “composition of place” (GR, 210):

A gull flies low across the darkening bay.  
Along the shore the casuarinas sigh.  
Resentful plovers give their ratcheting cry  
From the mown field scattered with bales of hay.

The world sinks out of sight. The moon congealed [ . . . ]  
A cry goes out from the exhausted will.  
Nightmares and angels roam the empty field. (CP94, 280)

This acutely observed natural landscape uses present tense, as does Trakl, with the subdued alliterative sibilance of lines 1 and 2 broken by the uneasy onomatopoeic “ratcheting” in the plovers’ cry (lines 3 and 4). The poem’s reclusive subject seemingly emerges in the disembodied “cry” going “out from the exhausted will” in St.2. The void, frozen quality of this world (“congealed” moon, “motionless” clouds and “empty field”) contrasts with its unquiet inhabitants (the flying and crying birds (St.1), the enigmatic “nightmares and angels,” or the premonitions of death (St.2)). The vivid physical world suggests the *hypotyposis* Harwood observed in McAuley’s Trakl translations.

### A “small stock of images”

McAuley stated it was “simple words and images” in a “small number of elements” which kept afloat “a range of multiple meanings” through Trakl’s work (GR, 203), seemingly

repeating his poetic precept from twenty years earlier: “Only the simplest forms can hold/A vast complexity” (“An Art of Poetry,” *CP*, 71). In their acutely observed worlds, both poets use adjectives with precision, their language retaining a universal, archetypal or figural quality. McAuley judged Trakl’s “themes, images, key-words” to be “very varied, and subtle and ‘polysemous’ and ‘multivalent’ within that range” (*GR*, 211), as his own work had become.

What McAuley called Trakl’s “colour language” (221) tends to be more symbolist than McAuley’s, or even synaesthetic, as can be seen in “God’s azure breath is blowing” in “Geistliches Lied” (“Spiritual Song,” 212), or “the brown stillness” of “The Ravens” (214). However, as McAuley noted, it was not “inflexibly fixed.” It tends to be naturalistically imagist, as in his own colour language in “Autumn Images” – “White geese feeding on sweet grass, /Crows flying over yellow pears” (*CP94*, 282). The realistic painterly tendency noted by Coleman becomes important in McAuley’s construction of presence. McAuley’s discursive leanings before 1960 had long been discarded in favour of the admired “concrete particularity.”

### **Decadent expressionism to naturalism**

In “Decay,” McAuley’s translation of Trakl’s sonnet “Verfall” (1913), the poem’s wandering, observing “I” subject is more prominent than in most of Trakl’s poems:

At evening as the bells are ringing peace  
I follow from afar the flight of birds;  
Strung out in flocks, like files of pious pilgrims,  
They vanish into autumn-clear distance. (*GR*,  
207)

However, a strong physical sense of place is animated with conflicting energies in the depicted landscape:

Then a breath makes me shudder with decay.  
A blackbird sings lament in the bare tree.  
A red-leaved vine sways on the rusty trellis.  
And like pale children in a dance of death  
Round about dark fountain-rims, that crumble,  
Blue asters bow and shiver in the wind. (*GR*, 208)

From the hopeful symbol – the bells (St.1, line1) – decay or abandonment is unleashed with the bird’s departure from the autumnal landscape, and in the frail actions experienced by the subject – “shudder” – and by the landscape – “sways,” “crumble” and “shiver.” By breaking the pattern of end-stopped lines, in the enjambment of the 3-line sentence in the last triplet, McAuley’s translation places greater focus on the metaphoric and symbolic play culminating in the final image of the shivering blue, metallic-coloured asters in their “dance of death.”

This is not an autumn of fulfilment and contentment. [ . . . ] it is a landscape of decay. But [ . . . ] there is also the sound of the vesper bells, and the sight of cranes or other migrating birds like pilgrims on the way to a distant [ . . . ], holy land. The watcher’s

spirit is drawn to make the transition with the birds from this existence to those “brighter destinies” (GR, 208)

The highly empathetic engagement in McAuley’s interpretation almost suggests Trakl has become a mask for describing experience and techniques already well understood. Gwen Harwood provides a clue, connecting the unstable motif of hope (and its departure) in Trakl’s migrating birds to McAuley’s similar use in an earlier poem evoking despair, and belatedness: (*Georg Trakl*, ii)

Look, cranes still know their path through empty air;  
For them our world is neither soon nor late;  
But ours is eaten hollow with despair (“The Tomb of Heracles,” CP, 59)

Those notes of unbelonging in McAuley’s 1949 poem, a time of intense doubt and searching that contributed to his adherence to Catholicism in 1952, seem revived and sharpened in his reading of Trakl.

The theme of decay, relocated from Baudelaire’s city to rural Tasmanian landscapes, is reflected in McAuley’s 1970s poems, including one of 12 sonnets in *MLN*, “In Northern Tasmania”:

Soft sodden fields. The new lambs cry,  
And shorn ewes huddle from the cold.  
Wattles are faintly tinged with gold.  
A raven flies off silently. [...] (CP94, 288.)

Here McAuley revisits the imagism of his youthful Rilkean poetics in “At Bungendore” (1938): “Now the white-busked lamb/ Deserts his ewe and bawls [ . . .]” (CP, 5). The lamb and raven of the later poem reappear as *leit-motifs* for vulnerability and threat. As well as showing McAuley’s penchant for naturalist detail (the “mud-pools at the gatepost”) and adherence to rhyme, the poem displays a “valedictory mood” (Smith, 1981 391), a predisposition to epigram in its concluding triplets: “A way of life is in decline” and “What it is time overwhelms.” This is less apparent in the work of Trakl.

Evident in 1949, and surfacing again in the early 1970s, McAuley’s own sense of belatedness – “Lateness is my fear, my crime” (“The Garden,” CP, 218) – pervades the Trakl-inspired work of his last half-decade. Curiously, the term “belatedness” matches the German “Verlassenheit” (abandonment, desolation, aloneness) on which both Trakl and Heidegger had written. For McAuley this sense stems variously from a foretaste of mortality, questions about poetic vocation and his relation to his culture and time. Edward Said’s comments on “Lateness” echo McAuley’s observations about illness: “[ . . .] The quality of time alters then, like a change in the light, because the present is so thoroughly shadowed by other seasons: the revived or receding past, [ . . .] the unimaginable time beyond time” (Said, 2006 xi).

Such heightened sensitivity intensifies McAuley’s lyric inwardness, his resistance to desolate realist observations, unleashing his “strong Romantic leanings [ . . .]” (Kirkpatrick, 204). In his needy response to Trakl’s voice and forms, the mutable McAuley reabsorbed an element of the late romantic decadent, liberating the early lyric voice into a richer late voice. The pared symbolist and epigrammatic techniques practised in reading and translating Trakl, his most important “poetic forefather” (McCredde, 266), represented a felicitous return.

### **“The solitary figure [...] walking, listening, seeing”**

In McAuley's 1972 poem "In Northern Tasmania," the subject emerges briefly as a wandering, watching "I" figure: "At dusk I look out through old elms" (CP94, 288). In McAuley's Trakl translations, the presence of the subject is mostly omniscient or disguised. McAuley noted the lack, in Trakl, of an authorial "I" figure, replaced by "a solitary figure moving through the landscape, walking, listening, seeing. Sometimes the poet refers to himself as 'eye,' but more often he avoids saying 'I' and leaves this figure as 'the solitary' or 'a stranger' or 'the silent one'" (GR, 207). In McAuley's translation "Winter Nightfall," the subject's gaze transfers to the wanderer appearing from the dark: "Enter, wanderer, take your fill" (CP, 103). The subject is often suggested by a shadowy figure or presence. In the translation "Music in the Mirabell Garden" the subject may be the "pallid stranger" (209) entering (the poet Trakl stepping into his house where his sister plays a sonata). Trakl's elusive "flâneur" prowls through his poetry at this time like that precursor, the "solitary," "homeless," "wanderer" of McAuley's earlier, 1938 translation of Rilke's "Herbsttag" (CP, 5).

At times McAuley's concurrent poetry employs a masked omniscient gaze through the *personae* that haunt his own landscapes – the "fevered sleeper, dreaming a call/From somewhere outside" and the "tired watcher/Lean[ing] forward" in "Sickroom" (CP, 223), which are among the first poems written during convalescence. "Motel, Burnie" offers a contemporary variation on the wanderer figures of Rilke, Trakl and Australian symbolist ancestor Christopher Brennan (1870-1932): "Travellers breakfast from a tray. [...] Then check out at the desk and go" (CP94, 286). The colloquial "check[ing] out" holds potent meaning for one facing terminal illness, but also shows the former neo-classical poet's use of everyday language, and wry humour. The autumnal sketch "Morning Voluntary" has the bells as narrator: "Flat strokes dinned out [...] / Tell the tale that must be told." "Private Devotions" introduces a "trespasser" figure, a Biblical variation on McAuley's recurring wanderer, or prodigal (the "wanderer in the darkness of the heart" of the earlier (1953) "A Leaf of Sage" CP, 80).

### **Animated Landscapes**

McAuley's early 1970s poems show a Trakl-like translucent impersonality, in which the mood, whether despair or reconciliation, is woven across an integrated symbolic landscape, often absent of human figures. His early spring poem "Pastoral" evokes the precarious balance between life and death: "Rain-filled ponds and brimming dams/ Hold an image of the sky" (CP, 224). Its landscape is sentient, energetic, its silence broken by the "hungry raven's cry," and charged with contrary forces of fullness and danger. The "brimming" presence of the dams and the wattle's "age of gold," contrast with threatening images – "Shadows wheel[ing] above new lambs." McAuley's "gold" is multivalent, here a spring image, but also autumn's spent foliage, as in "Autumn Images" – "Young poplars tremble in their gold" (CP94, 282). Such constructions resemble Trakl's irresolute landscapes, animated with sounds, breath, utterances and quivers. In Trakl's "Evening Thunderstorm" (GR, 222) "Seagulls cry round the window frames" and more expressionistically "The sick are screaming in the hospital."



More often the representation is harsh, as in “The Ravens,” McAuley’s version of Trakl’s “Die Raben” (1913) – “morosely resting./[...] quarrelling /About some carrion[. . .]” – but also shadowy and elusive, as they “suddenly fly off north/ And dwindle like a funeral procession/Into airs that tremble with sensual delight” (*GR*, 214).

McAuley associated the flight of birds in Trakl’s poems, including “Decay,” as “representing a transition, a passing over from here to the other realm – the idea, but not an actual release” (208). The vivid pictorial stanzas of both authors elaborate both a precise and suggestive world; nonetheless the somewhat random cataloguing of scenes, without apparent narrative or narrator, suggest a dream world. Northrop Frye describes this structure of “discontinuous units of the stanza” (1990 272) and its dream-world effect, as characteristic of the lyric genre, though Trakl’s and McAuley’s are not only entranced but decadent.

As earlier mentioned of “In Northern Tasmania” (*CP94*, 288), McAuley’s detailing of a symbolic world often gives rise to epigram. Occasionally this reflects a sense of reconciliation and affirmation, as in the concluding sestet of the sonnet “Saturday Morning” describing the harvesting of firewood and sodden leaves: “Boy’s voices from the Home next door/ Ring out like chimes, and every chore// Seems blest in ordinary light” (*CP94*, 287). The “chime” of the boy’s voices recalls “The orphans are sweetly singing vespers” from Trakl’s “Im roten Laubwerk voll Gitarren” (“In the Red Foliage Full of Guitars” *GR*, 221). More often, McAuley’s epigrams are pessimistic, reflecting a failure of understanding, as in “Another Day, Another Night” where: “[...] there is less and less that can be said./ When the wind lapses in a vast silence [...]” (*CP94*, 289). Trakl, less frequently, lets his symbolic evocations shift into philosophical commentary, as in McAuley’s translation:

And yet how sickly all this becoming seems!  
A breath of fever circles round a hamlet;  
Yet a mild spirit beckons out of branches [...]. (“Glad Spring,” *GR*, 216)

In the “Heideggerian” expression “becoming” (“Werdende”), Trakl seems to mean the birth/death cycle, or simply living. Referring to this sentence of Trakl’s poem, Calinescu suggests a “[modernist] Utopia that is silently embodied in the image of decline” (209). Interestingly, Trakl’s grim observation shifts to positive in the ultimate stanza, in a striking apprehension of paradox:

So painfully good and true is all that lives;  
And quietly an old stone touches you:  
‘Verily I am with you all the days.’ (*GR*, 217)

The ambiguous aphorism – “So painfully good and true is all that lives” – seems less linked with a human subject than fused with the wise “touch” of Trakl’s symbolic “old stone,” which McAuley judges to be “a cross or a statue of Christ” (*GR*, 217). The unexpected vatic – “So painfully good and true” – is here attributed to the poem’s “old stone” rather than to the subject, obliquely denoting acceptance. McAuley thought it “like God pronouncing it is good after his creation” (*GR*, 209). To the contrary, almost all epigrams in McAuley’s texts issue from the subject, a heavier presence than in Trakl.

## Synchronicity

There is a pronounced synchronicity in McAuley's encounter with Trakl; in the discovery of, and attraction to, Trakl's symbolic language and paratactic techniques, and in a recognition of a technical and spiritual affinity which also entailed a rediscovery of earlier, youthful techniques. Thus, a random comprehensiveness in the accumulation of detail, in end-stopped descriptive sentences returns in McAuley's later style, a "growing emphasis on the line as the basic 'semantic' unit of his verse, [reflecting] a certain fragmentation of perception, a less rationally structured movement away from his earlier more discursive mode" (Kirkpatrick, 197). Such fitfully catalogued descriptions and statements (Bradley 459) suggest a lower level of expectation, and a reluctance to make grand claims. The commentary, when it arrives, seems masked, enigmatic and surprising, akin to the aphorism Northrop Frye associated with the truth-telling seer (56). McAuley's aphorism is often expressed in the negative: "Loss is what nothing alters or annuls" ("St John's Park," *CP*, 222). Nonetheless, in aesthetic terms, the attainment of a stillness and objectivity seems an advance on the quarrelling voices of McAuley's middle phase.

McAuley admitted in 1975 that rediscovering Trakl "[...] happened at the right moment, because I found that he had worked out ways, procedures for the writing of intense, small rather lyrical poems which were the kind that I was ready to do" (De Berg 11, 352). Eleven years earlier, following his long experiment with the discursive poem, the poet had already accepted that the "modern short poem offer[ed] the chance of [ . . . ] exploring a limited situation," as demonstrated by Trakl, rather than "committing yourself to a whole world-view" (1964, 11).

## Travel and Dedication

McAuley's major tribute was his "pilgrimage" to Trakl's homeland, Salzburg, Innsbruck and the Wachau during October 1973, following his translation of the poems and his ABC radio broadcast (8 July 1973). It culminated in the dedicatory suite of four poems titled "Trakl: Salzburg." The first, titled "Mönchsberg" (the fortification within Salzburg), was written between April and May 1973, before McAuley's visit. The following poems, "In the Mirabell Garden," "In A Village Churchyard" and "Spiritual Song," were probably written during or after the visit, as they describe details of the city and region. These, unlike his translations of Trakl poems contained in his essay, were included in McAuley's publication *MLN* (1976, 289-292) and *CP94*, 289-292.

"Mönchsberg," comprising four triplets in blank verse, is an apostrophe to the poet for whom McAuley felt such rapport, named only in the overriding title "Trakl: Salzburg":

Heavy is such a task:  
Born in a broken time,  
To carry it all within,

And bear it into freedom,  
In a world towards evening where  
Insatiate hungers prowl.  
O music out of decay

Intoning a dark prayer!  
Rooks build in the sound

Of bells. A level mild sun  
Lights up new sprigs of green  
On boughs that shiver with cold. (CP94, 289)

The expressionist, curt trimeters and trochaic line beginnings, accentuate themes of decadence and belatedness, and of Trakl being “Born in a broken time,” and “In a world towards evening” (St. 2) before the outbreak of WWI. They voice a fellow-lament at the burden of the poet fated to be born out-of-his-time, or “in an impoverished time,” words cited by a younger McAuley in 1946 from Friedrich Hölderlin,<sup>xi</sup> also a forerunner of Trakl. The “heavy [...] task” (St.1) is that of being a poet. McAuley’s youthful apostrophic style returns in St.3 in the utterance “O music” and also his focus on abstract themes (time, freedom, hunger and decay) in contrast to the objective imagism of his late lyrics. However, that later style reappears in the last triplet, detailing a cold, late-winter landscape. Its rooks echo the morbid raven motif of Trakl, and even Poe, in a landscape infused with Catholic motifs, dark prayer (St.3), music (St.3) and bells (St.4). Even the “insatiate hungers” that “prowl” (St. 2) recall the elusive hunter-figures stepping through the Trakl translation “In Winter” (GR, 214) and McAuley’s Trakl dedication “Spiritual Song” (CP94, 292). The shivering boughs with “new sprigs of green” suggestive of Trakl’s animated landscapes, blend vulnerability and hope, like the music born “out of decay” (St. 3).

The emphatic trochaic meter of the first triplet (“Heavy is such a task: /Born in a broken time”) reinforces what McAuley observed: “[...] Trakl’s deeply pessimistic view of man’s condition [...] that mankind had never before sunk so deep as it had now sunk *after* the resurrection of Christ” (GR, 217). It echoes McAuley’s remark during his earlier spiritual crisis: “[...] my role is to *bear it all within me*, and not grasp at quick solutions” (Unpublished Notebook 1, 11 December 1950). Reading Trakl during his illness, McAuley revisits the malaise reflected in his essays (*The End of Modernity*, 1959). Such resonances explain how McAuley saw in Trakl a poet of admired technical skill (reminiscent of his own early style), and shared the blend of hope and uneasiness for the world in which each lived. “Mönchsberg” is a poem about kinship and self-recognition.

### **Other places, cultures, times**

The other three sections of the dedicatory “Trakl: Salzburg” are constructions of travel, marking the poet’s physical arrival in Trakl’s geographical world, his journey to Salzburg, Innsbruck and the Wachau during October 1973. Even while seeing Trakl’s world anew, McAuley’s poems are coloured by the world of his translations: the “scattered villages” of Trakl’s “Melancholie des Abends” (“Melancholy of the Evening,” GR, 215/St.3), the neglected “cross” which “surmounts the tangle of vine,” the beggar praying before “an old stone,” and the image of Mary from Trakl’s “Geistliches Lied” in “Spiritual Song” (GR, 212-3), as well as the “lament” and the “dance of death” of Trakl’s “Verfall” (“Decay,” GR, 207). Like the neglected cross, this rural Catholic world was already a landscape of decay in Trakl’s time, but one in which “God’s azure breath” could still be observed to be “blowing” (“Spiritual Song,” GR, 212). McAuley’s final dedicatory poem of the same title was an attempt to recreate Trakl’s “Geistliches Lied” (1913), using his six-line stanza. McAuley

thought Trakl's poem demonstrated, despite "so much that is fearful and horrible and distraught in the poems [...] a vision of innocence and peace and happiness, of goodness and rightness, and of intimacy with God" (*GR*, 211).

While not part of McAuley's formal homage to Trakl, another poem of this group, "Madonna," draws on the Catholic motifs of Trakl's "Geistliches Lied." In its three unrhymed triplets, followed by an irregular single line, "Madonna" offers an expanded apostrophe to the Mary of Trakl's poem: "Your head bent in the gesture of caring" ("Madonna," *CP94*, 283). The beggar in prayer in St.4 of "Geistliches Lied"<sup>xii</sup> reappears as McAuley's "derelict counting grains of prayer [ . . .]" (*CP94*, 284). However, the serene, nostalgic gaze upon Mary, the central figure of the Catholic faith which McAuley had stubbornly sought, is shattered by an undisguised, autobiographical outburst in the final triplet, in protest at the ritual-deprived post-Christian world:<sup>xiii</sup> "Give us back the images. And shut/The foolish mouths" (*CP94*, 284). The imperative Eliotian "Give us back the images," and abrupt "Shut/The foolish mouths" leaves an apocalyptic tang that threads through McAuley's late work. The poem concludes with a desolate array of images: "Whirls bits of paper, dust, dead leaves." They evoke both decay and, in the last line, cataclysm: "The sky runs cracks of jagged glare" (*CP94*, 284).

The decay of Trakl's old Christian landscape was well advanced, even within the European rural community, but more so in the vision of the contemporary travellers in McAuley's sonnet "Autumn in the Wachau" (*CP94*, 295), the last of the Austrian travel poems in *MLN*. The late twentieth-century travelling poet can be imagined among the "busloads" "in the church" (*CP94*, 295) who come to observe the old-world graveyard but who frown in their failure to understand the once-significant symbols of the medieval "coat of arms and martyr's crown." Sensitive to the presence of the past and the evidence of recent conflict endured in central Europe bordering western Asia, the poem offers the pagan simile of the "sun" of present and past times "riding" across the landscape, perhaps like the horse warriors of the "Hunnish nation" visiting its remoter past:

The sun rides like a nameless god  
That the Hunnish nation saw.  
Ancient ground cries out with blood (*CP94*, 295)

The "ancient ground" crying out with blood also suggests the witnessing by the youthful Trakl, who was posted to the German front at the outbreak of WW1. The "blood" and the "vanished flesh" of the first and second stanzas are both ancient and "raw" (*CP94*, 295). The poem presents a contrast between the "young" poet who died, near the front in late 1914, and the older, ill, visiting poet, depicted among the uncomprehending "busloads." It evokes belatedness, reminiscent of Thomas Hardy, that the Christian world, with its icons, is as transitory as its pagan predecessor in the face of time and indifferent nature. Rowe has suggested that McAuley's fractious relationship with the Catholic Church was "[...] fortunate for his poetry. It meant that the Church which might have falsely consoled him, received him as, secretly, he would have wanted: as the trespasser, the exile, the wanderer in the darkness of the heart" (1984 48).

McAuley's poems for the Austrian poet, his world and his apprehension are elegiac, paying homage to lost, past times in which Trakl lived and breathed. McAuley's travel texts create doubled layers of text – of place observed by McAuley, his imagined subjects and the apostrophised character Trakl – producing a dialogue resounding between present and past, between an Australian but also transnational poet and more significantly the other, earlier

European ancestor or precursor who had come to haunt McAuley's present and his poetic landscapes.

### **Becoming Trakl: Reading, Translation, Adaptation, Appropriation**

Reading McAuley's translations of Trakl beside his own poems from this time, the imprint of the Austrian poet on McAuley's work is overwhelming. Poem speaks to poem, in an echo of motif, phrase, mood, form, diction, colour-language, theme, rhetorical and metaphoric construction and figurative landscapes. It seems that Trakl's landscape of Salzburg and its rural surrounds were the landscape McAuley himself coveted (Page, 2014) and attempted to replicate or discover in his actual imaginative landscape of New Town and Tasmania. Paul Ricoeur has argued that an understanding of "otherness [was] at the heart of selfhood" (1992 318), notably in the travel involved in translation or reading, evident in McAuley's literary journey and his Austrian visit. While not acknowledging many, McAuley admitted the strong "influence of a remarkable kind, an Austrian poet, Georg Trakl, who belonged to the pre-World War One generation in Europe [...]" (De Berg 11, 351). McAuley admitted that Trakl "[...] has marked certain features of my late work. [...] I have been extremely interested in him" (Santamaria 56). The late poems (the dedication "Trakl: Salzburg" and the associated Trakl-influenced poems) and translations testify to a disconcerting homogeneity, a coincidence of lyric apprehension and forms, a shared vision of man in his search for order and meaning in a precarious world. Trakl's poetry and world haunts the later verse of McAuley, his Australian acolyte, to an extraordinary extent.

Maver has underlined McAuley's *fin-de siècle* affinity with the decadent Trakl (1990, 121). Kramer considers that McAuley's personal crisis and increased sensitivity arising from his illness made him feel especial sympathy with Trakl's "disturbed and sensitive spirit" (*JM* xxiv). Pybus argues that McAuley, visiting Salzburg with a girlfriend, was, like Trakl, tormented with sexual guilt, a trespasser like McAuley's *persona* in "Private Devotions" (*CP94*, 281) (1999 238). Ackland surmises that McAuley's own addiction to alcohol "drew him towards his doomed poetic double in Trakl" (2001 218) and that the Australian poet felt "compelled to replicate aspects of the doomed European's life," citing McAuley's own acolyte, Graeme Hetherington: "[...] with so little time left [ . . . ] He elected to be Trakl" (Qtd in Ackland, 230). While that claim seems overstated, Trakl does become the overriding ghostly presence in McAuley's late work, more pronouncedly than in his early apprenticeship to Rilke. However, as McAuley explained, "they were intense, small, rather lyrical poems which were the kind I was ready to do" (De Berg 11, 352).

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom emphasised André Malraux's observation how a young man's heart might be haunted by a "few almighty, often antagonistic ghosts [...]" (1997 26). So, if Rilke was one of the ghosts of McAuley's youth, the poet Trakl, already a light influence in his late thirties, would be the even heavier ghost of McAuley's late middle age; his penultimate productive period. In Bloomian terms, McAuley's "profound act of reading" Trakl (xxii), resulting in his combined tribute of dedication, translations and appropriations, might be described as a "swallowing" (xxi) of Trakl's haunting verse. Throughout McAuley's profound "Trakl" encounter we sense Bloom's "return of the 'apophrades'" (139) – the powerful dead in McAuley's work in which Trakl, in his middle pre-expressionist period, represents a restrained, more compatible, relative of Rilke, an early master. Bloom saw such vulnerability to a "revisionary relationship to the dead" as characteristic of the "mature strong

poet [evident in] poems that quest for a final clarity” (140). It reflects endorsement of the style to which McAuley returned – the paratactic nature lyric, enriched with experience and strengthened symbolic language. What Laurence Venuti has written about translation in the romantic period, in which the translator “loses his national self through a strong identification with a cultural other” (2004 20), applies to McAuley’s relationship with Trakl. The translation work feeds the growth of the poet. While McAuley’s earlier travel to the USA and Ireland provided literary stimulus and productive discovery of his childhood and natural culture, his interpretations of Trakl provided another kind of transportation, into the place and culture of the translated and, to a degree, appropriated “other” poet.

In *The End of Modernity* (1959) McAuley described the modern industrial world as one of “disinherited beings, cut off from the deepest sources of human satisfaction, [. . .] driven [...] through a course of life without meaning or direction” (“What Must be Developed,” *EM*, 25). He contemplated the order possible in a “metaphysically-oriented society” (“The Grinning Mirror,” *EM*, 69), possibly thinking of the central European villages Rilke had envisaged in “Herbsttag,” or the “old social order” he would find in Trakl’s early twentieth-century Salzburg (*GR*, 209). Throughout this time McAuley seemed less nostalgic for place than for time and culture, a prelapsarian anguish he had encountered in the poetry of the Australian symbolist Christopher Brennan.

While McAuley’s long repudiation of a national approach to poetry matched his cosmopolitan, even transnational, reaching out to other cultures, he consistently celebrated a “healthy, normal regionalism” (*EM*, 65). Since settling in Hobart, in 1961, and getting to know its natural and human landscapes, McAuley had found a “community small enough to be experienced as a whole, unsimplified” (Kramer, 1988 8), whose temperate European climate and landscape in some way matched the images of his European translations, and that became transformed, through poetry, into a world parallel to, and identifiable with, Trakl’s. McAuley’s Trakl translations brought about a creative dislocation, an experiment with a different and somewhat nostalgic mask, and the description of other landscapes quite close to his own.

Gwen Harwood describes the translator (but also poet) McAuley as walking with ease through Trakl’s worlds, suggesting thus a two-way or double occupation – Trakl in McAuley: McAuley in Trakl. For McAuley, reading and translating Trakl may have been, to recall Bloom, like looking into a mirror at his “gnostic double” (145) or an “encounter with one’s own alterity” (Ravenscroft 82-83). That crisply imaged and musical voice, that recognisable sense of place and situation McAuley admired in Trakl was, to some extent, being established in his 1960s poetics in poems of place such as “In the Huon Valley” and his 1970s lyric landscapes celebrating the homely, temperate environment of his new home, Tasmania. McAuley commented not long before he died that while Trakl’s influence had been “more identifiable than any other poet, [it had served] to liberate, not deflect, my native impulse” (*MAV*, 204). “I haven’t felt that I’ve been subjugated but rather have got further along my own way by the accidental meeting with Trakl’s work” (Santamaria 57-8).

### **Affinities – the “real subject,” the “special mode of expression”**

The presence of Trakl, arguably a poetics of decay and transience,<sup>xiv</sup> casts a heavy shadow over McAuley’s late lyric landscapes, being the strongest of his Bloomian precursors.

Sensitised by his illness McAuley lifted from Trakl's sensitive apprehensions (from another hemisphere and time) a lens for viewing and representing his late twentieth-century Tasmania at the time of his impending death: "Each breath we draw draws in the time allowed" ("In Aeternum," *CP*, 225). His late work gives shape to a somewhat older, more experienced, heavier *persona* than the haunted younger Trakl who steps beside McAuley through his lyric landscapes.

This wanderer of European towns and churchyards, as well as the parklands of his New Town home, has finally found less the epiphanic "'land of similes' closer to his own suburban home" (Kirkpatrick 193) than a familiar terrain from which he could draw meaning and of which he could speak authentically. There is recognition in McAuley's observation how: "In the last two years of [Trakl's] life he found his authentic voice, his real subject, his special mode of expression" (*GR*, 202). The Australian poet's excursion with Trakl reflected a similar transformation, but in the sense of what he called coming "full circle," recovering the symbolist short lyric poem (*MAV*, 204) and inward glance with which he had begun. It was something rediscovered, though its "greater depth of experience" brought a new inflection, the laconic, stoic voice, weighted with epitaph.

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<sup>i</sup> "Australian Poetry." *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. ed. Alex Preminger and T.V. F. Brogan, Princeton UP, 1993, 108.

<sup>ii</sup> In the 1982 edition of McAuley's Trakl translations the line was altered from this CP 1971 version to replace "swishes" with "clatters," and also the 4<sup>th</sup> line of stanza 1. See *Georg Trakl, Music in the Mirabell Garden: Translations, Images and Songs*, James McAuley, Larry Sitsky, John Olsen, ed. John Winter, Introd. Gwen Harwood, n.p.

<sup>iii</sup> Comparisons have been made by Coleman (1980), Catalano (1996), Gaffney (1976), Kirkpatrick (1984), Macainsh (1984), and Maver (1990).

<sup>iv</sup> The commentator mentioned was Eduard Lachmann. Fn 3, GR, 223.

<sup>v</sup> An honours thesis commenting on McAuley's translations of Trakl, by Elaine Wells for the German Department in 1972 at U Tasmania (McAuley note, 20 March 1972, Journal 13, Box 1), unfortunately, has not been located.

<sup>vi</sup> Most of the translated poems come from Trakl's *Gedichte*, Wolff, 1913.

<sup>vii</sup> The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein seemed to share McAuley's admiration, signalled by bequests in 1912 to both Rilke and Trakl.

<sup>viii</sup> Heidegger. "Language." (1959) 187-208. (Original lecture, 7 October 1950.)

<sup>ix</sup> “Symbolism: An Essay in Poetics,” 16.

<sup>x</sup> From ABC audio-tape, 8 July 1973.

<sup>xi</sup> Heidegger shared McAuley’s admiration for the German romantic strand in the “ontological poets” –Hölderlin, Trakl and to some extent Rilke, as outlined in his Hölderlin-inspired essay “What are Poets For?”

<sup>xii</sup> Trakl. “Geistliches Lied.” “Bettler dort em alten Stein/Scheint verstorben im Gebet.”

<sup>xiii</sup> McAuley saw the Vatican reforms as unleashing “a riot of anti-traditionalism.” “Culture and Counter-Culture.”1976, 18.

<sup>xiv</sup> Calinescu sees Adorno’s apprehension of decadence as “a culture of negation,” as belonging to modernism, (1987, 210).

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