R.A.K. Mason’s Universality

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On the dust-jacket of the 1971 edition of R.A.K. Mason’s Collected Poems, introduced by Allen Curnow, which was printed by the Pegasus Press in Christchurch (New Zealand), there is a quotation from his ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’—

here in this far-pitched perilous hostile place
this solitary hard-assaulted spot
fixed at the friendless outer edge of space

—followed by a comment from The Auckland Star (a New Zealand newspaper):

These much quoted lines do not so specifically refer to New Zealand as to the plight of man: though perhaps the image would have only occurred in that way to a New Zealander.

I have often wondered what made the critic think of Mason’s lines in this way. I can see justification for the belief that they refer to the plight of man, but I have difficulty accepting that ‘perhaps the image would have only occurred in that way to a New Zealander.’ I presume that the critic’s reasoning may have run along such lines as this: ‘New Zealand is—as I know, and as many people have pointed out—an isolated country, far removed from others, and hence no doubt Mason sees it as a “hostile place”, “a solitary hard-assaulted spot”, and so on.’

But the actual words of the quotation do not readily identify the ‘hostile place’ as New Zealand at all. Indeed, there is inherently no particular reason for thinking of New Zealand as, for example, a particularly ‘hard-assaulted spot’, and the place described is seen as fixed at the friendless outer edge of space: surely the space of the universe rather than that of our planet. In other words, the critic’s first impulse is right: Mason is writing about the plight of man, trapped in a hostile place, i.e. our planet, which, in the space of the universe as a whole, is ‘fixed at the friendless outer edge’. Even if perhaps a poet in an isolated country might see our earthly existence more readily in these terms than someone in, say, London, the fact remains that Mason does not draw attention to the origin of his feeling as inspired by his country, and that he produces a statement couched in general terms, as though it has universal applicability.
If we turn to the poem as a whole, which I now quote, we shall, I feel, find in it confirmation of the interpretation I have just advanced:

Garrisons pent up in a little fort
   with foes who do but wait on every side
   knowing the time soon comes when they shall ride
   triumphant over those trapped and make sport
   of them: when those within know very short
   is now their hour and no aid can betide:
such men as these not quarrel and divide
   but friend and foe are friends in their hard sort

And if these things be so oh men then what
   of these beleaguered victims this our race
   betrayed alike by Fate’s gigantic plot
   here in this far-pitched perilous hostile place
   this solitary hard-assaulted spot
   fixed at the friendless outer edge of space.

   (p. 35, 1924)

The poem is surely called ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’ because Mason sees mankind, in general, as though ‘pent up in a little fort’, and therefore in need of unity. Men need to be ‘friends in their hard sort’ (l. 8) because they share a painful situation. There is nothing to suggest that the ‘Garrisons’ of the first line specifically consist of New Zealanders. The poet is concerned with our human plight on this planet: it is as though we are trapped by enemies and know that ‘the time soon comes when they shall ride / triumphant over those trapped’ (ll. 3-4). I do not feel that Mason allows us to guess very specifically who our ‘foes’ are. Perhaps they represent Death, or a hostile divinity about to destroy us. In any case, the comparison Mason offers in the octet appears to allude to a general human situation, not just life in New Zealand. The poet’s point is that men who are trapped in a little fort threatened by a common enemy would not ‘quarrel and divide’ (l. 7); hence mankind in general should not do so either. If the garrisons of the octet would not quarrel and divide, why would ‘these beleaguered victims this our race / betrayed alike by Fate’s gigantic plot’ (ll. 10-11)? I cannot see how ‘this our race’ could refer to New Zealanders rather than mankind generally; and ‘Fate’s gigantic plot’ suggests that Mason feels that we, as human beings, have a right to feel that there is a superior force in the universe which in a malicious way aims to injure us. Indeed, this force is less than honest, for we are ‘betrayed’ by it.

It is not at all impossible, I submit, for a Londoner to feel what presumably Mason felt when he wrote this poem. Someone in a big city may still feel ‘solitary’ and may still see our planet as a ‘far-pitched perilous hostile place’, particularly if the person’s sense of isolation derives from a feeling that we have been placed in earthly abode by a God who does not care or is actively malicious. Mason was, in his poems, much haunted by the fear of such a God (or such gods), as in ‘Evolution’:

Why have our gods abandoned us?
   whence come we the mysterious?
why are we here? why were we sent
   for God knows what experiment
   of breeding men as men breed mice
   for scientific sacrifice?

   (p. 55, 1934)

Here the sense that we are bred like mice ‘for scientific sacrifice’ implies not only that we will suffer pain during our life, but also that this pain is part of the process of death. This poem is rather more explicitly ‘philosophical’ than ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’, and perhaps helps to throw some light on that. In line 1 of ‘Evolution’ Mason wonders, ‘Why have our gods abandoned us?’ This is not unlike his complaint in ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’ that we are ‘victims this our race / betrayed alike by Fate’s gigantic plot’. In other words, ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’ is probably concerned with the notion that we are treated in a hostile manner by a superior force which has deserted us or, inasmuch as it is at all interested in us, deliberately afflicts us with suffering. In ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’ we are beleaguered victims, but it is not immediately clear who the enemy is. Perhaps one is to conclude that in both poems the hostility is that of a divinity which desert us instead of looking after us—which, indeed, torments us instead of showing good will. The most cruel joke it plays upon us is that we are given our earthly existence only in order to see it terminated by death. All the suffering that it afflicts us with does not serve to help us in any way, but only the divinity itself, which is engaged in some inscrutable scientific experiment.

Clearly the questions that Mason touches on in these poems are some of those that are fundamental to our earthly existence, and to see him as writing specifically about life in New Zealand significantly reduces the importance of what he has to say. ‘Evolution’ may not be a very striking poem artistically, but its agonizing questioning can be understood anywhere as addressing the baffling nature of humanity’s life on earth.

It will be obvious that I find this questioning commendable because Mason addresses issues of such fundamental concern, and that he appeals the more to me because he asks questions rather than that he provides
answers. Of course, this does not mean that he has no convictions at all: for example, he appears to have little doubt that life on earth is painful. Also, ‘Sonnet of Brotherhood’ urges us to be friends rather than ‘friend and foe’. But on balance his poems are searching and exploratory rather than assertive or ideological, and this makes his art more ‘objective’, more ‘accessible’ to others, than a seemingly religious body of poems like his might easily have been. Let us for example consider the following poem:

**ECCE HOMUNCULUS**

Betrayed by friend, dragged from the garden hailed
as prophet and as lord in mockery
hailed down where Roman Pilate sat on high
perplexed and querulous, lustily assailed
by every righteous Hebrew cried down railed
against by all true zealots—still no sigh
escaped him but he boldy went to die
made scarcely a moan when his soft flesh was nailed.

And so he brazened it out right to the last
still wore the gallant mask, still cried ‘Divine
am I, lo for me is heaven overcast’
though that inscrutable darkness gave no sign
indifferent or malignant: while he was passed
by even the worst of men at least sour wine.

(p. 59, 1934)

This is an important and representative Mason poem, and I should like to examine it in some detail. First I wish to consider how some of its formal features serve to pull Mason’s readers into the poem rather than to distance them.

The most curious aspect of the poem’s formal arrangement is perhaps that while it has the structure of a conventional ‘Italian’ sonnet (consisting of an octave and sestet rhyming a-b-b-a-a-b-b-a-c-c-d-c-d-c-d), it is unorthodox in its use of a ‘hanging indent’ emphasizing the octet / sestet division in a somewhat lapidary manner, and—especially—in its comparative lack of punctuation. The latter, in a poem with normal syntax, is so unusual, that it is tempting to see whether as readers we lose anything by punctuating the poem according to conventional expectations, for example as follows:

Betrayed by friend, dragged from the garden, hailed
as prophet and as lord in mockery.

hailed down where Roman Pilate sat on high
perplexed and querulous, lustily assailed
by every righteous Hebrew, cried down, railed
against by all true zealots—still no sigh
escaped him but he boldly went to die,
made scarcely a moan when his soft flesh was nailed.

And so he brazened it out right to the last,
still wore the gallant mask, still cried ‘Divine
am I, lo for me is heaven overcast’
though that inscrutable darkness gave no sign,
indifferent or malignant: while he was passed
by even the worst of men at least sour wine.

The only marks I have added here are commas. It might be objected that one effect of this modification is to diminish the syntactical division between ‘querulous’ and ‘lustily’ in line 4. Mason’s punctuation certainly makes it quite plain that ‘perplexed and querulous’ is a phrase which refers to Pilate, not Christ; but if there is a syntactical difficulty about the function of this phrase I think that is due to its placing, and my punctuation in any case still makes it likely that the reader will connect it with Pilate, as only a comma after ‘high’ in line 3 would lead one to suppose that (perhaps) ‘perplexed and querulous’ refers to Christ, as part of a chain of segments (i.e. ‘Betrayed by friend’ and ‘dragged from the garden’ and ‘hailed / as prophet’, etc.). So I do not think that my commas do, in effect, make the function of ‘perplexed and querulous’ less clear than in Mason’s own version.

There is another possible theoretical objection to my punctuation: that it eliminates ambiguities which Mason has intended. This is perhaps particularly the case with respect to the first two lines. Does Mason mean that at first Christ is hailed as prophet and then (once the crowd changes its mind) is mockingly hailed as lord instead? Or is he hailed both as prophet and as lord but only mockingly (where ‘in mockery’, at the end of the line, provides unexpected bathos and irony, and perhaps suggests the crowd’s fickleness)? I would think it improbable that we are to read, in effect, ‘hailed / as prophet and as lord, in mockery / hailed down . . .’

If there is an ambiguity here my punctuation does not eliminate it. What one can adduce against it is ultimately that it creates more immediate clarity than Mason’s own punctuation brings about. For example, while it is extremely unlikely, in my view, that ‘in mockery’ should be seen as related to ‘hailed down’, its position in Mason’s very lightly punctuated poem may well make the reader pause more about its exact status than my comma after ‘mockery’ does. And this, I submit, is
the general effect of the comparative absence of normal punctuation in Mason's version: the reader is given the impression of a number of words strung together in a sequence on which order is still to be imposed. We are given the sensation that there is much for us to do: that the poet is not directing us, but asking us to see appropriate divisions and links for ourselves, as though the world which he offers us is difficult to make sense of—which is presumably precisely what he himself felt and wants us to feel.

For the major questions that the poem raises are by themselves incapable of being answered logically: how can God allow Christ to feel so much suffering without guaranteeing that heaven is overcast for him? How is it that God appears to be so cruel that 'even the worst of men' (l. 14) appears more generous? Why does God make us live in such a world?

Mason does not provide solutions, but offers the enigma to us, and he does so by presenting to us a dramatic picture of Christ's plight which is so powerful that we are made to feel the nature of the poet's problem. We are not offered some limiting ideology here, but a depiction of an intense human experience—Christ's suffering—which represents the suffering of all of us and, as well, raises the central question: what universe is it in which such unreasonable pain occurs?

Obviously the reader needs to know something of the Bible, or at least of Christ's story, to understand the human situation presented for our consideration. But it is not unreasonable for a poet to ask us to acquaint ourselves with Christ's plight, and one does not need to be a committed Christian, or indeed to have any specific theological belief, to understand the issues involved. What we do need to have is an appreciation of human pain, and enough intellectual curiosity to reflect on its function in our universe: with these human attributes we can approach the significance of Mason's poem no matter where we are or what our private beliefs are.

We can surely all of us understand what it is like to be betrayed by a friend, to be dragged from the garden, and in general to suffer the iniquities and torments to which Christ is subjected. Mason avoids the kind of simple picture from which we might recoil. The presentation of 'Roman Pilate' (l. 3), for example, is marvellously subtle and balanced: he towers over Christ, sitting 'on high', but he himself is human enough to be 'perplexed and querulous': although he has power (and hurts Christ by not using it to his advantage), Pilate is mentally crippled by not understanding what happens yet tries to remain impressive by being 'querulous'. The irony in expressions like 'every righteous Hebrew' and 'all true zealots' in lines 5 and 6 is piercingly effective in undermining human error and pretence, yet, in being indirect, allows a momentary understanding of Christ's enemies. Christ is not sentimentalized as a victim, but shown to be a worthy adversary of his tormentors by heroically and stoically putting up with what they do to him: thus he 'made scarcely a moan when his soft flesh was nailed' (l. 8). We are enabled to feel his pain and yet to admire his ability to tolerate it. Thus Christ is made at once someone like all of us yet superior in that most of us would not be able to show his fortitude.

Yet, for all his superiority, Christ is not—or at least not demonstrably—held up for pious veneration. The poem is, after all, entitled 'Ecce Homunculus', not 'Ecce Homo' (i.e. 'View the little man', not 'View the man'). There is surely a note of some slight disapproval on Mason's part in the expression that Christ 'brazened it out right to the last' (l. 9). It would be exaggerated, no doubt, to feel that the poet is hinting that this hero is somewhat of an impostor, or someone too audacious. But 'he brazened it out' does mean 'he carried it off impudently', and Mason presumably implies that Christ's confidence in 'Divine / am I, lo for me is heaven overcast' may well be mistaken, or indeed unsubstantiated, especially in that it does not rest on any firm evidence. Hence Christ can do no more than wear 'the gallant mask' (l. 10) which he has chosen to wear. For, despite Christ's claim, heaven remains an 'inscrutable darkness', and it gives no sign because it is either 'indifferent or malignant' in its attitude to the sufferer (l. 13). Mason appears to believe that if heaven was overcast for Christ's sake the connection between it and Christ would show itself to be quite unambiguous. In not giving a sign to confirm the truth of Christ's claim, heaven—and by implication God, if He exists—was too indifferent to Christ's pain or actively malignant in withholding support. The point is not that we can be sure that there is no God in this universe, but that if He does exist He either does not care about our suffering or delights in it. The implication is that at best such a God is not worth having, and that at worst He is positively injurious to us.

By contrast, in this enigmatic world, 'even the worst of men' gave Christ 'at least sour wine' (l. 14). When I first started reading Mason seriously, many years ago, I used to think that he was here drawing a contrast between himself (denied any sympathy from his fellow human beings) and Christ (who was treated somewhat better). I have become increasingly convinced that this reading is faulty. It sentimentalizes the poet (who would be basking in self-pity), and there is just no evidence that Mason has himself in mind at all, at this point. The true poignancy of the ending here is that, astonishingly, even the worst of men is less heartless than God appears to be. Such a contrast is both utterly painful and philosophically baffling. Mason succeeds fully in giving us a universally accessible and valid picture of our human experience, while he at the
same time raises the central question of the purpose of our existence in searching metaphysical fashion. Through his dramatic presentation of Christ's suffering and God's apparent failure to come to the rescue, Mason offers us new insight into what he believes may be the significance of Christ's suffering, as distinct from what Christians are conventionally taught. It is not as though he trivializes the Bible; rather, his dramatic rendering of one of its central episodes presents us with a fresh view of what that great book has to offer us.

Mason's Christ-centred poem is universal in its significance because the poet uses the figure of Christ to reflect, in an artistically suggestive and ideologically unfettered way, on central aspects of human experience anywhere, and to ponder the significance of life on earth in relation to what may be its function within the universe at large. It is not just his concentration on the Christ-figure which—he appears to realize—will interest his readers, but his view of Christ. Part of the poet's success derives from doing what the reader does not expect, yet can see to matter in its intrinsic human significance. Thus, for example, in the puzzling 'Tribute':

Christ Jesus came to my door
riding upon an ass
and though I am but weak and poor
I could not let him pass

I called to him and bade him stay
and bade him pass my porch:
then though it was all brightest day
I lit my every torch

Then I thought I'm but weak and poor
and though I am but small
spilled all my wine upon my floor
wasted my unguents all.

(p. 37, 1924)

The really surprising words here, I think most readers would agree, are ultimately ‘spilled’ and ‘wasted’ in the last two lines. The poem would have seemed more ‘logical’, more ‘coherent’, if the last stanza had run:

Then I thought I'm but weak and poor
and though I am but small
placed all my wine upon my floor
offered my unguents all.

In this version, we would have a speaker displaying the utmost admiration for Christ. The speaker's account would go something like this: 'I am a very great admirer of Christ who wanted to pay tribute to him when he came to my door, riding upon an ass. Although I am myself weak and poor, I decided I would offer him the best I could, i.e. wine and unguents. I called on him to stay and come inside ['pass my porch'] = pass through my porch). I showed my utter devotion to him by lighting every torch in the house, even though it was all brightest day and though I don't have strength or money to spare. I placed wine on the floor for him, and offered him all my unguents.'

But we cannot legitimately re-write the poem; it does not have 'placed and offered' in lines 13-14, but 'spilled and wasted'. What are we to make of these words?

They are unmistakably negative words, and one's first inclination is to think that they are used to criticize the speaker. If he really valued Christ, thus one feels, he would have made sure that he would not have spilled his wine. Such wastage must be the result, somehow, of carelessness. It is harder to envisage quite how he wasted his unguents, but presumably this, too, results from some fault on his part.

This approach to these words ('spilled' and 'wasted') gains some support from the fact that the speaker says in lines 7-8, 'then though it was all brightest day / I lit my every torch'. This action suggests, at best, supererogatory zeal. Its wastefulness may be intended to remind us of the five foolish virgins in Matthew 25, who burned their lamps without thinking of taking oil with them, but 'Tribute' does not offer a specific parallel. Rather, the question arises: if it is 'all brightest day', what point is there in lighting every torch in the house? Perhaps we are to see this action as not just wasteful, but something even more negative. The speaker may have tried to impress Christ unduly, and it is even possible that he misjudged Christ's values by assuming that Christ would be impressed by a gesture altogether too physical. To think that Christ needs physical light may imply that one pays too little respect to his spiritual being. Similarly, the speaker's over-active desire to please Christ at a physical level may have led to his inadvertently spilling his wine, and—perhaps in connection with this—to waste his unguents.

In this reading, the poem is largely ironical at the expense of the protagonist, the speaker, the 'T. And for many years I assumed that this is the interpretation Mason wants us to see. I still think that this reading is one that is justified by the facts of the language—is at least tenable. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how any intelligent reader would not think of this interpretation as at least one legitimate reading. The language of the poem supports it as one very real possibility, and one is drawn toward seeing the poem in this way on the basis of the fact that
conventionally Christ is thought of as perfect and man as flawed: if there is insufficient contact between Christ and us—thus one feels inclined to think—the fault must be ours.

Maybe it is, but the reading just advanced does have its difficulties, and while I am sure it is one possibility that Mason wants us to entertain, he also makes us doubt its correctness as the only possible reading. Why, after all, would there be something so very wrong about the speaker lighting his every torch even though it is broad daylight? The action may be physically unnecessary, but, in displaying such zeal, is the speaker not in fact showing proper spiritual respect to Christ? Isn't his intention totally benevolent, even if just possibly he misjudges what Christ wants from him? Isn't he also, after all, at the least a touch tragic in being weak and poor yet spilling his wine and wasting his unguents? We are not told how he comes to spill his wine. It may result from clumsiness, but is that such a dreadful thing? Does it show that he is unduly materialistic? Surely not: he may be so enthusiastic that he finds it impossible wholly to control his actions. And if he wasted his unguents—Mason may imply—that does not necessarily result from a shortcoming on his part.

For, even if we take it that the spilling of wine somehow indicates a fault, it does not follow that the wasting of unguents is in the same category. The spilling of the wine does not necessarily cause—and indeed is not necessarily in any way connected—with the idea that the unguents are wasted. Mason may, in fact, be suggesting an altogether different interpretation from the one that is perhaps most immediately obvious, i.e. the one described at some length above. If we assume that the spilling of wine results merely from over-enthusiasm, and not from any undue emphasis on the physical or an improper wish to impress, it becomes possible to believe that it is Christ who is ultimately responsible for the speaker’s sense of having wasted his efforts. We may imagine a speaker who because he sees Christ riding upon an ass concludes that Christ must be in need of some physical care. Matthew 21:1-5 is perhaps the passage we most immediately think of when we envisage Christ as sitting on an ass:

And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples,

2 Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me.

3 And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them.

4 All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying,

5 Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, the King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.

The prophet mentioned is Zechariah, and it is probably the language used in Zechariah which Mason is most closely echoing: ‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass’ (Zechariah 9:9; my italics). Jesus’s riding on an ass shows him in a humble position, naturally enough leading anyone—even if mistakenly—to feel that he is in need of physical comforts.

The speaker of the poem may misjudge the inner values of his guest, but we are surely entitled to ask how he is to know them. One of the most curious features of this poem is that it is constructed as a dramatic narrative containing only one speaker. We know from what he tells us what the speaker went through and feels now, but we have no way of knowing what Christ felt or thought. We do not hear him speak, even in the past tense, nor do we know anything about his actions beyond the fact that he came, as the speaker says ‘to my door / riding upon an ass’. If we wish to be ultra-cautious, we would have to assume that we have no evidence for believing that Christ actually did stop and come in. Or if he did, he may have been more insensitive than if he had moved on. For if there is a difference between the speaker spilling his wine on the one hand and wasting his unguents, then it may be possible that we are to envisage that it is Christ who inspires the actions in some such way as the following. (1) In his enthusiasm the speaker, once he sees Christ, is so overawed that he spills his wine. If so, there is no implication that Christ adopts any particular attitude. (2) With respect to the unguents, the speaker may feel that he wastes these for a very different reason, viz. that Christ does not accept them. Indeed, as Christ is not described as active in any way, we may have to think of him as not even remotely interested in the speaker’s devotion. And if this is so, Christ surely is to be seen as curiously distant and insensitive, as uncaring.

Both readings, I feel, are possible, though they are almost opposites as regards the poem’s final attitude to Christ in each case. And I think the ambiguity, which arises from the poem’s dramatic suggestiveness, is a strength rather than a weakness. An over-pious reading may operate on the loose assumption that automatically it is the speaker who is at fault, not Christ; but upon reflection this seems too easy a response on the reader’s part, and the poem turns out to contain a completely different meaning alongside the one which is perhaps the dominant one, the one
which is critical of the speaker. Thus the poetic strategy of the poem is designed to make us explore in a deep and universal way the significance of the meeting between Christ and man here presented.

Such a meeting is also the subject of a poem closely related to ‘Tribute’, namely ‘Oils and Ointments’:

Let me fall down about your feet o Christ that have bruised and bled along the lonely way, wait here my bringing forth those highly priced treasures I have saved up this many a day.

The ointments I bring up to you my lord gleam jewels like a steel-flashing beetle shard lo! I shower down cascading the rich hoard frankincense aloes myrrh cassia spikenard,

Sluggish oil that glints o look rainbows and gold gently assailing unguents the orient has spiced slow pouring balm smooth smearing calm behold and stretch out your soothful longing foot o Christ.

(p. 46, 1925)

The poet’s attitude towards the speaker may well again be ambiguous. Our interest in the universality of the scene is first aroused by the fact that it seems to take place in the present. The speaker, as in ‘Tribute’, meets Christ as though the latter is still alive. There is also, as in ‘Tribute’, an expression of great warmth, on the speaker’s part, for Christ, which humanizes the scene. But again the speaker is perhaps implicitly criticized. At first he shows no doubt the right kind of sensitivity: ‘Let me fall down about your feet o Christ / that have bruised and bled along the lonely way’—towards the place where you will be crucified. But although the speaker’s oils and ointments are of course intended to assuage Christ’s suffering, there seems to be a hint of materialistic pride in his description of them as ‘highly priced / treasures’ (ll. 3-4). The connotations of the imagery are not necessarily merely positive in ‘The ointments I bring up to you my lord / gleam jewels like a steel-flashing beetle shard’ (ll. 4-5; my italics). There may be too much self-preoccupation in ‘lo! I shower down cascading the rich hoard’ (l. 6). If we wish to be very severe, we may feel that the speaker is even a little presumptuous in speaking at the end of the poem about Christ’s ‘longing foot’; for although from the speaker’s point of view it seems perfectly logical to think of Christ as having a ‘longing foot’ that is in need of balm, the speaker cannot really know whether Christ does have the feelings imputed to him, and whether the gifts are welcome.

But, as in ‘Tribute’, the very absence of any visible response on Christ’s part has the curious effect of making him inhuman in comparison with the ardent speaker. And it is difficult to feel at all sure that we are to see the speaker’s wish to make Christ’s pain more bearable as anything other than praiseworthy. The comparative unattractiveness of ‘jewels like a steel-flashing better shard’ in line 6 appears to be counterweighed by such a beautiful sensuousness as is evoked by line 12: ‘gently assailing unguents the orient has spiced’.

The meeting between Christ and man, given Christ’s highly charged significance in the Bible and Christian tradition and history, is potentially of course always of universal interest. But it is the nature of Mason’s imagination, his way of depicting this meeting, which truly universalizes the poem for us, once again provoking a complex response both to Christ and the speaker of the poem. The poem is dramatically open rather than doctrinally closed.

The poet’s ambiguity in his attitude towards Christ also colours our reception of ‘Judas Iscariot’:

Judas Iscariot
sat in the upper
room with the others
at the last supper
And sitting there smiled
up at his master
whom he knew the morrow
would roll in disaster.
At Christ’s look he guilefully—
for then as thereafter
Judas was greatly
given to laughter,
Indeed they always said
that he was the veriest
prince of good fellows
and the whitest and merriest.
All the days of his life
he lived gay as a cricket
and would sing like the thrush
that sings in the thicket
He would sing like the thrush
that sings on the thorn
I used to read this poem as expressing unmixed disapproval of Judas. Not only does a conventional assessment of Judas’s action lead one in this direction, but the poem itself also gives reason for such a reaction. It is possible to think of Judas as a treacherous hypocrite because stanza two presents him as smiling at his master while yet he knows that the morrow will ‘roll’ him in disaster. In stanza three, we see how at Christ’s look Judas ‘guffawed’, i.e. laughed coarsely or boisterously. Such language is hard to ignore: ‘guffawed’ suggests deliberate nastiness on Judas’s part.

Yet not all people have reacted to the poem in this way. According to Charles Doyle and others, Dylan Thomas wondered whether this poem did not shock people in New Zealand. I used to think of this as a very strange remark, for, if the poem clearly expressed condemnation of Judas (as I assumed it did), it is hard to see why anyone would have the right to feel shocked: in the Bible as here, Judas’s behaviour—thus I reasoned—is shocking, but this does not mean that it should not be presented in a poem. What I did not realize is that this poem—as distinct from the story in the Bible—might strike someone as shocking because one can see Mason as not simply presenting Judas in a negative light.

I would not go so far as to say that the poem actually praises Judas. If it contains two currents, as I now think it does, this is because after stanza three the poem appears to change direction to some extent. Indeed, even in the first three stanzas the emphasis on Judas’s laughter, as distinct from something more obviously cruel, is odd and arresting. While initially one thinks of it as expressing coarse, deceitful contempt for Christ (who does not know how he is being tricked), it becomes possible upon reflection to see this laughter as the action of a man who is in essence amoral rather than immoral; even if he does get a sense of amusement out of his treachery, this appears to arise from a totally different temperament than the conventionally moral one.

In this respect, Mason departs from the Biblical version of Judas’s story. For in the Bible, Judas actually is conventionally moral. The beginning of Matthew 27 makes this quite clear:

When the morning was come, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death:
2 And when they had bound him, they led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor.
3 Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,
4 Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that.
5 And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

It is possible to feel a degree of sympathy for the Biblical Judas at this point. Once he sees the result of what he has done, he repents, and seeks to make amends by addressing the chief priests and elders. It is perhaps their total lack of proper sensitivity which drives him first to throw down the pieces of silver in the temple, and then to commit suicide. He tried, eventually, to do the right thing, but found no response, and then put an end to his life.

But if the Biblical Judas is more moral than Mason’s, it is also possible to condemn him more: if he had the capacity for distinguishing between right and wrong, one more readily views him negatively than Mason’s Judas with his remarkable unconcern. For that Judas is an apparently charming chap, much liked as the ‘prince of good fellows’ (st. 4, l. 3); and he exhibits a natural, spontaneous enjoyment of life expressed in his singing ‘like the thrush / that sings in the thicket’ (st. 5, ll. 3-4). He appears to be a person in whom the moral dimension is lacking, which by definition makes it impossible to blame him for behaviour that would be immoral in those who do have a conscience.

Thus this is again a poem which allows a complex, diversified response on the part of the reader—one which can be approached in more than one way because of its intellectual and artistic openness. And again one does not need to be a Christian to ponder the significance of what is offered: Mason is, in fact, far less interested in Christ here than in what we are to think of the psychology of a traitor. The dramatically presented situation is, especially in its ambiguity, of great interest and importance to human beings anywhere, at any time.

I do not wish to suggest that it is invariably ambiguity which gives interest or value to these poems. Let us consider for example the following:

THE VIGIL
All night long I lay awake
feeling the hope for daybreak
All night long I lay
longing for some god to pray
All night long I heard bells toll
JOOST DAALDER

where the cruel grey breakers roll
All night long I heard that cry
such as men give when they die
All night long where the bleak big
lone cliffs shelve I heard men dig
Morning came and the cock crew
clearly, shrilly, and I knew.
(p. 29, 1924)

Surely we see again the influence of the Gospels here. Compare for example Matthew 26:34, where Christ says to Peter, ‘Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.' Peter rejects this suggestion, but does proceed to deny Christ, leading to the following climax at the end of the chapter:

74 Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.
75 And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crew, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.

Mason presents in his poem something like the modern equivalent of Peter. The protagonist is depicted as a troubled, restless soul. He is afraid, but does not seem to know of what, hoping for daybreak as a relief. He is lonely, and seems to feel that he would feel better if he had a god to pray to. This person, thus Mason appears to imply, is in need of divine assistance, but has forgotten that Christ exists. At a distance, he hears bells toll, and especially, in the words of the fourth couplet, ‘that cry / such as men give when they die’. We, like the speaker, feel perturbed by this, but like him do not know who it is that dies. The sinister sound of men digging a grave likewise is enigmatic, until all is revealed suddenly at the end of the poem: ‘Morning came and the cock crew / clearly, shrilly, and I knew’. What the speaker now knows, and we with him, is that the person who was killed during the night, and from whom the speaker was so isolated even though he longed for a god to pray to, was Christ, or at any rate someone very much like him. Thus this modern event, presented by Mason in dramatic form, is at once very different from and yet similar to Peter’s experience, and involves us as well as the speaker. There is no ambiguity here, but the poem gently steers us towards its deeply meaningful conclusion, leading us to face universal questions and truths without any narrowness of view.

But—it may well be objected—surely not all poems by Mason are as universal as these. Isn’t the following poem set firmly in New Zealand?

R.A.K. MASON’S UNIVERSALITY

WAYFARERS

That I go out alone to them it seems
because they see none with me in the way
ignorant that the fabrics of my dreams
are less intangible than they

Ignorant that I have heard and seen Christ break
the bondage of his tongue-tied sightlessness
have walked with firm-faithed Mary to the stake
and kissed the hem of martyred Flora’s dress

And I in Lichfield frequently have been
Chatterton’s accessory in suicide
have Gaius Marius in Minturnae seen
for many hours by Waiatemata’s tide

Burnt Dian’s temple down at Otahuhu
and slain Herodotus at Papatoe
and here in Penrose brought Aeneas through
to calm Ausonian lands from bloody Troy.
(p. 36, 1924)

In a superficial sense, the poem is indeed set in New Zealand. Lichfield is the place where Mason was educated, while Penrose is where he was born; and both are in New Zealand. However, the names do not inescapably convey as much. To an English reader, Lichfield will suggest the ancient cathedral city in Staffordshire. An American might recognize Penrose as a place in Colorado. By contrast, the Maori names ‘Waitemata’, ‘Otahuhu’ and ‘Papatoe’ belong unequivocally to the geography of New Zealand. But does the New Zealand context really matter?

I do not think that it does, except in the negative sense that mentally New Zealand is not where the speaker—who in this case can surely be identified with the poet—sees himself as residing. Other New Zealanders do, because their emphasis is on what is physical and present. By contrast, what concerns Mason is what exists in the mind and belongs to the past. Indeed, the events of the past are in some cases real and in other cases mythical, but they are all equally meaningful to the imagination of the poet, who has no difficulty experiencing them as occurring in the here-and-now of New Zealand. To him, Chatterton is real, not because such an English poet once really lived, but because he can imagine him as an ‘accessory in suicide’ in New Zealand c. 1924. So, far from what the people around him think, he is in no sense ‘alone’ when he appears to be
so, but in vital contact with what his imagination shows him—a world actually not in New Zealand, but mentally projected onto it by his imagination. It is, ultimately, the world outside New Zealand which counts, the culture of other countries. In no sense, then, is Mason's poem significantly that of a New Zealander. I would argue that although the intense preoccupation with a foreign cultural world may have been intensified by the poet's New Zealand environment, anyone, anywhere, can share his experience, which is emphatically presented as 'cross-cultural' and thus universal.

There is, in fact, no important concern with place in Mason's poetry. In many poems, no specific place whatever is suggested. Where one is, Mason's preoccupation is not with New Zealand.

Of course Mason is not unaware of physical limitations such as the passing of time, as in:

**SONG OF ALLEGIANCE**

Shakespeare Milton Keats are dead
Donne lies in a lowly bed
Shelley at last calm doth lie
knowing 'whence we are and why'
Byron Wordsworth both are gone
Coleridge Beddoes Tennyson
Housman neither knows nor cares
how 'this heavy world' now fares
Little clinging grains enfold
All the mighty minds of old . . .
They are gone and I am here
stoutly bringing up the rear
Where they went with limber ease
toil I on with bloody knees
Though my voice is cracked and harsh
stoutly in the rear I march
Though my song have none to hear
boldly bring I up the rear.

(p. 45, 1925)

Clearly the great tradition of poets listed here is one among whom Housman is mentioned as the last, and places emphasis on nineteenth century achievement in a way that a more modern taste would not. But it is also true that Mason's gaze goes back as far as Shakespeare: as a poet writing c. 1925, he feels he has been preceded by many great classics, and indeed considers the poetry of the past superior to his own; as he writes towards the end of his poem:

Where they went with limber ease
toil I on with bloody knees
Though my voice is cracked and harsh
stoutly in the rear I march
Though my song have none to hear
boldly bring I up the rear.

We must note here, though, that he is not merely looking back with a sense of defeatism. His song may be 'cracked and harsh' (he feels), and he is in a position where all he can do is to bring up the rear, but he does so 'boldly'. He is endeavoursing to write a poetry which will still have value, which is part of a great enduring tradition rather than merely an act of homage. At the time of writing, his 'song has none to hear', yet he continues his cultural struggle.

Another thing that is curiously noteworthy about this poem is that the poet does not in any sense point out that he is a New Zealander. He may feel that his task as a poet is harder than if he lived in Britain, but we cannot be sure of this. A British poet might also, at any time, feel that the achievement of his predecessors is hard to match, and that it is difficult to find an audience amongst one's contemporaries. At any rate, New Zealand is not mentioned in the poem. It is not as though the poet is presenting himself as a member of a society other than that of Britain: what he stresses is that he is part of a poetic community which is British.

If his outlook is at all restricted, that is because he confines attention to that community. However, in for example 'Wayfarers' he does not do so, and we must therefore assume that he here limits himself to mentioning British poets for the sole reason that he is writing in English. It makes better sense for such a poet to see himself as part of the literary tradition of Shakespeare than, say, Homer or Racine. This is not a matter of insularity, but of recognizing the peculiar characteristics of the linguistic medium within which one works.

All in all, then, I see Mason hardly as a specifically New Zealand poet, but agree with the view that he is 'a poet of universal reference who is probably not better known elsewhere because of simple geographical rather than cultural barriers'. These words were written some decades ago, and are perhaps no longer fully applicable today. Nevertheless, I feel
that Mason still deserves considerably more attention outside New Zealand than he has so far attracted. If this essay serves even in a small way to make him better known abroad it will have met its central objective.

NOTES

1. All poems are quoted from this edition, presented by the publisher as the ‘Definitive Edition 1905-71’ (the years of Mason’s life). There are, in fact, several impressions of these Collected Poems (first published in 1962, now published by Victoria University Press, Wellington). However, as the book is not always easy to find outside New Zealand, I have published in their entirety those poems which I discuss. The page number at the end of each poem refers to its place in the Collected Poems, while the year is that of publication as mentioned in that volume.


3. Curnow points out, in his Introduction to the Collected Poems, that Mason adopted the ‘hanging indent’ around 1930 for all his poems, and that for a 1941 selection of his poetry he removed most of the conventional punctuation which poems published in 1924 and 1925 had contained. Thus we can see that both the hanging indent and the thin punctuation of ‘Ecce Homunculus’ (published in 1934) are part of a very deliberate artistic strategy.

4. All my references to the Bible will be to the Authorized Version.

5. Doyle (cf. n. 2 above), p. 47.

6. Words contained in ‘a British national daily’s review of a recent New Zealand anthology’, according to Curnow, who quotes this statement on p. 15 of the Collected Poems.