R. A. K. MASON: THE POET AS A PACIFIC CHRIST

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R. A. K. Mason (1905-1971) has often been regarded as New Zealand’s foremost poet to date. Critics do not, however, appear to have identified those qualities which primarily account for the extraordinarily strong emotional impact which his poems make on friend and foe alike. It may be that the poet’s religious postures are found too embarrassing to talk about frankly and penetratingly, and that it is easier to discuss whether some poems refer to New Zealand or not, or to comment on his (supposed) concern for his fellows. The fact is that the vast majority of Mason’s poems derive their individual character not only from his use of language (which will not be considered here in detail), but also, and above all, from his perceiving of himself as a Christ in New Zealand, ignored and victimised by a society consisting of Pharisees.1

In his Introduction to Mason’s Collected Poems, Allen Curnow refers to an article by Mason’s fellow poet, A. R. D. Fairburn, in the N.Z. Artists’ Annual of August 1929. Fairburn says about Mason’s early and important collection The Beggar (1924):

I am unable to say exactly how many copies of the little book were sold, but I know that at least nine-tenths of those printed were left on his hands. He must have become sick of the sight of them in the end. I remember meeting him one day, and his telling me, half in sorrow and half in relief, that he had just been down to the end of the Queen’s Wharf [Auckland] and had disposed of a bundle of two hundred. “Thank God I’ve got a few of them off my mind, anyway!”2

Curnow goes on to say that this gesture “resists any simple interpretation. The poet [of The Beggar poems] is so much older than his years. Did something in Mason, echoing something in his native country, whisper insistently that such things should never have been written at all?” Certainly, as Curnow suggests, Mason’s attitude in the incident seems complex, but it is not likely that Curnow’s own interpretation of it, presented here, is correct, for, as we shall repeatedly see, Mason saw the relation between himself and his country as one of victim and tormentor. On the evidence of the poems, this vision pre-dates the time when Mason, presumably wanting to establish himself quite clearly as victim, threw the volumes of The Beggar into Auckland Harbour. “Lullaby”, the
earliest poem in the *Collected Poems*, published in 1923, is informative about what appears to have happened. The “enemy”, doubtless representative of New Zealand society in general (in Mason’s view), has exhibited considerable sadism towards the poet.

...whom thing with scarce a mind
all long lifetime you did grind
Down to tilted machine-like toil
black with muck and reek of oil. (p. 19)

One may, because of New Zealand’s predominantly agricultural economy, have some doubt about the accuracy of the picture of the industrial bogey presented, but the opposition between the poet and his materialistic, mechanistic oppressors is obvious. It is true that in this poem Mason gleefully later reverses the roles, imagining that he can dig out the enemy from his grave; but even then the relationship does, of course, remain a sado-masochistic one, and the sequence is important: it is Mason who starts off as the victim.

It is not the intention of this essay to become biography and in any case, where one is primarily dealing with images which the poet has of himself and others, it would be impossible to plot the exact course of his psychological development. What is evident is that from an early stage in his poetic career, the poet saw himself as a victim of an oppressively materialistic society. The dichotomy presented by him is one commonly found in New Zealand writing, for example in Frank Sargeson or less subtly in Janet Frame. The way Mason presents the dichotomy is, however, entirely his own. The notion of being a victim (not merely an outcast from bourgeois society) readily came to express itself, one must assume, in the image of the poet as a Christ within his isolated Pacific country, having no audience and meeting only hostile neglect, which in turn produces a martial opposition in him — as in “Song of Allegiance”: “Though my song have none to hear/boldly bring I up the rear” (p. 45).

It is only by approaching the poems thus that we can come to understand the frequent references to a “voiceless” Christ. The contrast is between the “brawlers” (“The Agnostic”, p. 26) or Judas Iscariot who “would sing like the thrush” (p. 57), and the poet whom one would expect to be eloquent but who is killed by such traitors and thus rendered “voiceless” (“In Perpetuum Vale”, p. 31), and who in any case a “cracked and harsh” voice *because* he has “none to hear” (p. 45). Judas Iscariot, in the poem of that name (p. 57), is merely another image of the “enemy” or the typically materialistic opponent of the poet: this traitor is everything the poet is not — he sits in the “upper/Room”, always cheerful, always singing easily and fluently though resting “on the thorn” of the Christ-poet.

Christ, or the poet, is typically non-materialistic, non-successful, non-seeing, non-singing. It may be useful to study these things in some detail in “The Beggar”:

*Curse the beggar in the street
  that he has less joy than I
  as at these fine old trees’ feet
  body-satisfied I lie.*

It is he whose throne sobes thin
all along this lovely dale
till slight pleasure grows rank sin
against Pan’s pipes his pipes prevail.

It is he with loathsome mien
gibbers by the sweeping car
as for joy we steer for green
fields where frail pools sleeping are.

He has damned my fine-bound book
and my pleasantness of meat
blasted with his withering look
all that once I glad could greet.

*Curse the beggar in the street
curse the beggar that he die
curse him for his shrivelled feet
and his cruel sight-striving eye.* (p. 25)

One may be forgiven for thinking at first that this poem expresses a hatred of beggars, but rather, the strategy of the poem is Blakean and it is the speaker who is, ironically, criticised by the poet. The poem nowhere clearly equates the speaker with the Pharisees or with Judas, or the beggar with Christ or Mason, but there can be no doubt that the opposition which Mason again has in mind is that between the “enemy” of his first poem “Lullaby” (p. 35) and himself as the Christ-victim. In “Lullaby”, the poet presents the enemy’s grave as near “dark trees”, and here he is lying “at these fine old trees’ feet”. The enemy is further identified as “body-satisfied”. The beggar, on the other hand, lacks the “joy” of the enemy, or, of Judas. That we are to think of him as a poet is evident from the second stanza: typically, his “throne”, though not quite voiceless, “sobs thin”, rebuking the physical “pleasure” of his opponent with a force that belies the thinness of his sound and thus prevails against “Pan’s pipes”. The reference to the “fine-bound book” in the fourth stanza is also revealing: the enemy’s book has exactly the physical qualities lacking in Mason’s publications — such as *In the Manner of Men* (1923) which never got beyond the manuscript stage, or the *Penny Broadsheet* (1925), which was a piece of paper folded so as to make four pages. Deprivation is the hallmark of the beggar-poet-Christ: the “shrivelled feet” of the last stanza are mentioned many times as characteristic of Christ, even if not exactly in these words. For
example, in “On the Swag” (p. 56) the beggar — who turns out to be Christ — needs “slippers on his feet”; in “Oils and Ointments” (p. 46) Christ’s feet “have bruised and bled along the lonely way”; and in “Tribute”, Christ rides upon an ass, no doubt because he cannot walk on his sore feet (p. 37). Physically, at least, the poet is unable to see, and again there is no mistaking the patent allusion to a blind Christ (and thus the poet) rather than just any beggar. Christ’s “sightlessness” is explicitly referred to in “Wayfarers” (p. 36). It is the poet’s intention to draw unmistakable attention to himself as lacking in all such physical attributes as his opponents have, and to make those opponents doubly loathsome not only by presenting their neglect of him but also their wealth and superficial happiness as opposed to his own absolute starvation and misery.

To suggest that Mason is presenting himself as Christ is not to suggest that he never presents Christ as anything but an image of himself, or that he is not aware of a range of connotations that such an image brings with it. In “Tribute” (p. 37), there is little likelihood that the “I” of the poem is Christ; indeed, Christ seems to be carefully distinguished from the protagonist, who yet is not himself the “enemy” either. Here, rather, the description of Christ is meant to indicate to us how Christ serves as an example to the poet. To do this is not, of course, inconsistent with the presentation of the poet as Christ elsewhere. We are offered a genuine comparison throughout the volume, accentuating similarities as well as differences, though the differences do not appear to be such as to make one feel that Mason is no longer in Christ’s company.

What is the lesson of that curious poem, “Tribute”? It seems to be one of the most puzzling poems in the book:

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 though 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)

It is inconceivable that Christ, in the poet’s view, is ungracious enough not to accept kind gifts. Yet such a word as “wasted” implies surely some shortcoming on the part of the speaker. I presume that the speaker is wrong even to think of himself as “but weak and poor”. This implies a degree of materialism absent from Christ, who does not need the extravagance of torches lit on “brightest days”. Our reading of the poem is that it contains the sort of subtle irony found in “The Beggars”, and we are led to this in the context of the many poems presenting the poet himself as Christ: even here that comparison (despite the contrast between the two) seems to be implied in the fact that the speaker is, like Christ, generous — even if in a somewhat misdirected way. We learn a truth about ourselves, thus Mason implies, not by seeing Christ as quite alien to us, but by becoming aware of our resemblance to him.

Nor is Mason’s persistent inclination to liken himself to Christ nearly as presumptuous as it might seem at first. Despite “The Agnostic” (p. 26), Mason’s own position with regard to a belief in God or in Christ’s divinity appears to be that of Arius in “Arius Prays” (p. 108), where Christ is seen as “framed of impetuous blood and fallible clay”, and “your soul they say/drank with the rest annihilation’s drink”. Christ is called on in support (“Be with us Lord...”), but in order that he may “laugh with us like a man not like a god”). Throughout the poems, Mason seems to be firmly within the English Romantic tradition in stressing the superior humanity of Christ rather than his divinity, which is doubted and in any case not generally held important. One may — and some will — nevertheless object to a poet thinking himself so very similar even to Christ seen this way, but there is of course a difference here with a poet who sees himself as divine.

Unless we see Christ as human and thus like us, we shall have difficulty understanding a poem like “Nails and a Cross” (p. 109). Christ is “the mystery-born”, but probably only because it is “Miraculous” how the “life-stream has flowed/from birth down through each ancestor” (“Miracle of Life”, p. 33), and Christ is very human throughout — so much so, in fact, that it becomes possible to stand back from the tragedy and to view it differently: “and while the tropes divide up my cloak/the mob fling dung and see the joke”. We, too, are no doubt meant to “see the joke”; it is no accident that the ending of this poem is largely the same as that of “Lugete O Veneres” (p. 62), in which we may sympathise with the grief of the youth losing “the girl on the next farm”, but must ultimately be detached enough “as we laugh at the farce”. On the other hand, while we are to perceive the humanity of Christ in “Nails and a Cross”, we must not overlook the fact that the poem is, as usual, also one in which the poet presents an image of Christ to dramatise his own situation and that of anyone who may feel like him): he mocks his own self-pity and tendency to dwell on his own suffering as in “...I see, if I squint, my blood of death/ drip on the little harsh grass beneath” (my italics). One may wonder, perhaps whether the poem does not depend too much on our thinking of the poet rather than Christ; however, it is also successful as a description of Christ’s possible
feelings on the cross so long as we can use our imagination sufficiently to view Christ as man rather than God. In fact, Mason appears to postulate a sharp distinction between a very human Christ (who perhaps in this poem has some fallibility) and a detached God who deserts him and us, the God who abandons us in the hour of need ("Evolution", p. 55; "The Seventh Wound Protests", p. 107).4

With such considerations about Christ’s humanity in mind we can with some confidence approach the important “Ecce Homunculus”:

Betrayed by friend dragged from the garden hailed as prophet and as lord in mockery hauled 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. (p. 59)

The conclusion, “while he was passed by even the worst of men at least sour wine”, is ambiguous, and perhaps meant to be. At all events, the poem gains by the ambiguity, and it is preferable to see it as existing. Mason may mean that in contrast to the indifferent or malignant heaven which refuses to give a sign, even the worst of men at least gave Christ sour wine — not much of a gift, but a gift showing something more constructive than indifference (let alone malignancy). Or, if the “homunculus” of the title is chiefly Mason himself, we can read he as emphasised: Christ was given at least sour wine, but Mason, worse off than Christ, is not even given that. It seems to me that any objective reading allows both possibilities, and we may, in defence of the second interpretation, think of Mason’s complaint that his song “has none to hear” ("Song of Allegiance", p. 45): Christ at least receives some attention, in “Ecce Homunculus”, while the poet is totally ignored. But for both the pain is human.

This poem can usefully be related to the short piece, “If the drink”, which begins the 1934 collection of verse:

If the drink that satisfied
the son of Mary when he died
has not the right smack for you
leave it for a kindlier brew.

For my bitter verses are
sponges steeped in vinegar
useless to the happy-eyed
but handy for the crucified. (p. 53)

One’s initial impulse may be coarsely to paraphrase: “If you are not sad enough to be Christ, ignore the sour wine which I (as one of ‘the worst of men’) am offering”. There is something in this, but the equation of Mason and “the worst of men” does not seem likely. Rather, this appears to be the address of one Christ-like victim to another: the sponges steeped in vinegar are poems steeped in suffering, poems which cannot be understood by “happy-eyed” creatures like Pilate or Judas. The image is not that of “sour wine” being passed as in “Ecce Homunculus”: while there may be little to choose between that and “vinegar”, the fact is that wine may remain wine even if sour, while vinegar is something altogether more unpleasant. Mason means that his poems may be “handy for the crucified” because, being crucified himself, he may be of significance to others who go through the same experience. This poem seems to imply an almost complete similarity between the poet and Christ. However, Mason emphasises that Christ is a man by extending the experience of crucifixion not only to himself but also others who are not “happy-eyed”, and thus makes the poem once again one which is not as self-aggrandizing as a superficial view might lead us to think. Feeling for fellow-sufferers is only arrived at through
personal suffering, it is true, and not as direct as appears to be thought by those who see this poet as ethical rather than Romantically self-preoccupied; but Mason's sense of humour at his fate, as in "Nails and a Cross", and his frequent habit of offering us a picture of a human Christ who lacks any pomposity (or is to be criticised if he shows it), a Christ whose feelings we can all share — all this makes it impossible to charge him with a wholly unacceptable self-indulgence or lack of interest in his fellow-man.

The question may arise: what, if anything, makes this poetry specifically that of a New Zealander? How sure can we really be that we are offered a picture of a "Pacific Christ"? I think the present essay has already gone a long way towards establishing that the poet sees himself as a Christ victimised by his (New Zealand) society. But it needs to be stressed that the New Zealand situation underlies the poems rather than that it is often explicitly stated. Anyone with sufficient imagination and sensitivity can feel himself in a position comparable to that of the poet, but one must have some idea or experience of isolation and of what it means to be victimised by a group of people unified in a wish to destroy or at least ignore one, if one is to appreciate the poet's suffering fully.

Consider these lines from "Sonnet of Brotherhood":

...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)

In view of what the poet feels about New Zealand in general, the "hostile place" ("this hostile country here" in the "Stoic Marching Song", p. 54) is, perhaps, his native land; and I think that someone who has spent considerable time in New Zealand and can feel as the poet does is more likely to respond intensely than someone who has no sense of this or a similar locale. But the type of geographical position, although unusual to most of us, is nevertheless not unique; and is not the description an apt one of our planet as we may sometimes feel about it? There is in fact no certainty here that we are to think of New Zealand at all. At other times — in "Wayfarers", for example — we most assuredly are, in view of explicit references:

...I in Lichfield frequently have been
Chatterton's accessory in suicide
have Gaius Marius in Minturnae seen
for many hours by Waitemata's side

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

The New Zealand references are, however, used for a negative purpose: no effort is made to give a distinctive, individual character to the places mentioned. On the contrary, the poem asserts in its first stanza that "they" (the New Zealand Pharisees, Mason's opponents) are "ignorant that the fabrics of my dreams are less intangible to me than they". At the same time, due weight is nevertheless given to the physical presence of the New Zealand scene. The poem is poised around a contrast between the narrow-physicality and narrow-mindedness of New Zealand on the one hand and the universal imagination of the poet on the other.

This is typical of the poetry in general, at least in its implications. The New Zealand scene is used; and we persistently sense its presence even if it is not declared. It is important — more important, perhaps, than the poet intended it to be, who is more silent about it than any of his colleagues; without it, the poetry might not have been written, unless the poet had lived in some other place conspicuously similar, and certainly much of its intensity derives from what we feel to be a quite extraordinary contrast between the artist and his environment. Unwittingly, and without having anything to boast about, the New Zealand of Mason's poetic period (roughly from 1923-41) may have contributed to the creation of a poetic output possibly definable as uniquely "New Zealand" in character. But the poet himself is of universal significance because of the powerful and varied way in which he dramatised his own specific plight in terms which are rarely explicitly local and most often at least become universal and timeless.
NOTES

1 No-one yet has properly realised that the composite image, in Mason’s poems, of what can most simply be called a beggar-Christ, is first and foremost a projection of the author himself. There have been some good discussions of Mason in other respects, the most substantial ones being Charles Doyle’s *R. A. K. Mason* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970) and J. E. Weir’s *R. A. K. Mason* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977), both of which contain further bibliographical references. Weir seems to me quite a perceptive critic, but even he (and very recently) speaks of the “man-Christ” etc. in the poems without apparently realising at all that the poet is presenting himself as such. Our perspectives on the poems therefore differ significantly.


3 Or herself. We think, of course, of the woman who anointed Christ’s feet. But Mason is creating his own myth.

4 The distinction appears to be clearly Romantic, reminding one of Blake’s division between what he saw as a tyrannical God-the-Father invented by man and a human and admirable Christ. Shelley develops a similar distinction in, for example, *Prometheus Unbound*, though less obviously in Christian terms. Although J. E. Weir, in *R. A. K. Mason*, rightly observes the importance which Shelley had for Mason, he might have added that Blake’s influence is actually more striking and influential still — for example, in the cryptically-ironic presentation of poems like “Tribute” (p. 57), including the repeated “then” of, say, Blake’s “Chimney Sweeper”. Mason is not in any way remarkably derivative, however.