
R.A.K. Mason's Poetry

impregnated by his "other self," thus ensuring that the child is the true grandchild of Saleem's "father."

It is difficult to sum up Midnight's Children, full as it is of every conceivable novelistic device, futile to try giving a useful quotation in a short review. It is entertaining to read, and yet exhausting. I would rather re-read Ishmael Reed, who minimizes language while maximizing imagination, history and politics, while Rushdie maximizes all. And yet - how else could the whole lumbering story of a dismembered, colonized multicultural subcontinent be told? The whole world belongs to the consciousness of the modern Indian, and Salman Rushdie, living in England, denies nothing while breaking out of imprisoning Chinese, that is, Indian boxes. Midnight's Children is an astonishing achievement.

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Irony in R.A.K. Mason's Poetry

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In two previous essays on the poetry of R.A.K. Mason, I have presented him as essentially a sensitive modern romantic at odds with the New Zealand where he spent his life from 1905-71, and with, in a larger sense, not only man but also the universe itself. Concentrating on this side of his sensibility, I have rather tended to ignore Mason's technique, and it is my wish in the present essay to redress the balance somewhat by examining the kind of ironic devices he uses, and to what effect he puts them. Obviously, if we take into consideration the purpose of this aspect of his technique, we may be led to conclusions which will either affirm or deny the view of him that I have developed in my previous work.

The most immediately striking technical advance over "Lullaby" and "Sonnets of the Ocean's Base" that reveals itself in "The Beggar" is that Mason has learned to handle his first-person speaker with irony. The opening of "Lullaby" -
Didst not o mine enemy
think in pleasant death to lie
shrinéd in pomp-girt cemétery?

– is perhaps chiefly interesting for its rather mannered archaism-
classicism. The way of seeing contains some irony in that, of course, the
polite tone of the speaker contrasts with the fact that things have not
turned out as the enemy would have expected. However, the speaker of
the poem hardly becomes more than a slight disguise for the poet, who
seems to derive considerable satisfaction from a situation in which he
imagines himself as digging up his opponent “midst the moan your
money made” and singing a sarcastic lullaby for him now that he has
relocated him in a

... spot hell-black

Where thin vinesuntouched by scythe
leanly thrustinglank and lithe
like fouled snakes around you writhe

Where the stunted dark trees brood
like black phantoms obscene lewd . . .

The bitterness evident here is made the more intense as well as
artistically more interesting by the use of a dramatically conceived first-
person speaker 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.

The “I” has become an identity quite distinct from the poet; indeed,
the reference to his lying “body-satisfied” under trees rather different
from the “stunted dark” ones of “Lullaby” indicates to us that the
speaker is the very enemy of that poem. We are introduced, therefore, to a
protagonist ironically presented – a fact central to an understanding of
Mason’s poetry in many places, and one generally overlooked in critical
accounts,³ or at least not seen to be a consistent and significant
phenomenon.

The basic point of the irony in “The Beggar” is that through the shock
it produces in the reader a stock response is prevented, and the need to
sympathize with the beggar is established. The essential distinction in
many of the poems is between on the one hand the “beggar” who is an
image chiefly for Christ-Mason, and on the other hand the materialistic
tendencies to be presented as Judas, either directly or by implication,
or Peter, or at any rate a non-Christ. I have argued the Christ-Mason
identification elsewhere: in “The Beggar” itself the identification is
obvious from the fact that the beggar is a poet (stanzas two and three),
and at the same time is a Christ figure in view of his “shrivelled feet” and
“sight-striving eye” (cf. references on pp. 36, 46, 53, 56, 108).

In “The Vigil” (p. 29), we are presented with a protagonist “longing
for some god to pray.” It appears to be suggested that he denies Christ
by not doing anything when he hears bells toll, a cry “such as men give
when they die,” and men digging. But “Morning came and the cock crew
/ clearly, shrilly, and I knew.”

What the speaker now knows, surely, is that he in fact is Peter, and
that it is Christ who has died – the “god” he has sought. The speaker is
not treated as savagely as the one in “The Beggar,” but the poem is no
less dramatic, and, rather than indulging in self-pity, it attacks. The
emphasis is here so far removed from Mason as a Christ figure that one
need not think of the poem as being in any way self-concerned; it is the
nature of treachery which we are faced with, although, in the world
of the poem as a whole, the effect is undoubtedly enriched if we realize the
various connections between situations and figures. To insist that the
speaker here is Peter and not Judas is not to gainsay that we are invited
to compare one kind of treachery with another, and that it is difficult to
forget that what is dramatized is in many cases certainly a personal
situation. The poems derive much of their poignancy and intensity from
the circumstance that the author is pointing out the perpetual force of
Christ’s story by casting his countrymen into the role of enemies to
himself as Christ. Vice versa, the poet’s own plight is lifted out of what
might have been sentimentality by his dramatic presentation.

The disapproval of the “I” as a non-Christ may be severe or mild, as it
seems to be in “Tribute” (p. 37). Nevertheless, we are likely to get the
meaning of that wrong if we do not perceive that it is based on a similar
strategy to that of “The Beggar.” The speaker calls himself “weak and
poor” in two of the three stanzas; yet he feels that he could not let Christ
pass; he lights “every torch” though it “was all brightest day,” and finds
that despite his poverty, weakness and smallness, he has spilled all his
wine, and wasted his “unguents all.” One’s first inclination, particularly
in our present anti-Christian anarchy, may be to suppose that it is Christ
who is criticized; but of course Mason intends us to see that it is he who is
truly weak and poor, and that the protagonist is in part a hypocrite, and
in part too boastful about his supposed sacrifice. The persona’s emphasis
on that, too, shows that he quite misunderstands Christ’s being and role.
One is reminded of the kind of irony Blake levels at some of his protagonists, and probably not without reason. The cryptic “Body of John” (p. 32) also recalls Blake in technique and particularly in playing on the reader’s likely stock response only to upset it:

Oh I have grown so shrivelled and sere
But the body of John enlarges,
and I can scarcely summon a tear
but the body of John discharges

It’s true my old roof is near ready to drop
But John’s boards have burst asunder
And I am perishing cold here atop
but his bones lie stark hereunder.

Weir (p. 17) points out that Mason’s family name was John, and that an earlier version had “Ben” – no doubt for Benjamin, the younger son. Although Weir appears to be rather uncertain about the intention of the poem, it must surely be once again to present the contrast between the materialistic “I” and the Christ-Mason whose fate is far worse than at first, in our tendency to identify with the speaker, we might think. Indeed, our initial inclination might be to feel that there must be something seriously amiss with a body which “enlarges”; the profound sense in which Christ-Mason does this is not really obvious until the final moment when we realize that “John” is dead, with the materialist significantly “atop.” (We remember, after some re-readings, that the protagonist of “Judas Iscariot” [p. 57] sits in the “upper” room.)

One of the grave ironies of our time, as Mason sees it, is not only that we do not recognize a Christ in our midst, but have only the faintest recollection of Christ as a historical figure. In fact, it is only despite the speaker of “Old Memories of Earth” (p. 28) that we understand what he does not:

I am positive that yesterday
walking past One Tree Hill and quite alone
to me there came a fellow I have known
in some old times but when I cannot say.

The artistic success lies not merely in the irony of a speaker not comprehending at all what lies behind this meeting, but also in our being made conscious of what is truly a double irony in that the “fellow” is not only the historical Christ but no doubt also the poet, “One Tree Hill” being an unmistakable reference to Mason’s Auckland.
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It is of course also possible to use the "I" ironically in order to elicit the unexpected approval. In these instances, the speaker is Christ or a Christ-like creature or more directly the poet himself. Thus in "Wayfarers" (p. 36) the irony resides in the fact that the speaker, who seems to others alone because he does not mix with present-day New Zealand company, leads a far from lonely life in "the fabric of my dreams," in which, tellingly, Christ is the first-mentioned of many figures who have transcended the superficial restrictions of a particular time or place in their significance. One of these is Herostratus, the protagonist of "Hierostratus at Ephesus" (p. 39), who, like Christ or the poet, is a victim at the hands of those who "spit at me scorn me" because in their eyes, as in those of Quintus Curtius, he is a "profligate villain," but who against these bourgeois expectations turns out to be the only one who "inherits immortality." The "voiceless" Christ of "In Perpetuum Vale" (p. 31) is "tongue-tied" in "Wayfarers," and it is not far-fetched to relate him to the poet with a voice "cracked and harsh" in "Song of Allegiance" (p. 45). In all three instances the irony appears to work at more than one level: the seeming lack of voice, of articulation, on the part of the victim is due to his tormentors (he is "voiceless because I had died," in "In Perpetuum Vale"), but it also proves to be eloquence, either because of the meaningfulness of the Christ figure ("Wayfarers") or because the claim about a "cracked and harsh" voice is to be taken with a grain of salt in a poem like "Song of Allegiance" — a magnificently confident poem rhythmically and in its other artistic aspects. In this connection, it may be worth suggesting that perhaps the effect of near stammer sometimes achieved at first sight in some poems because of Mason's habitual omission of punctuation is probably in itself an ironic pose even though also responsible for much of the pathos.

Very occasionally, the speaker is treated with self-critical irony, or at least some hint of criticism aimed at him, while yet predominantly we are to sympathize because he is the usual Christ-Mason protagonist. Certainly we see this tendency in the rather distasteful "Lugete O Veneres" (p. 62), which is written in the third person but uses a structure similar to "Nails and a Cross" (p. 109). In both instances, an attempt is made rather too suddenly, at the end, to avoid what a reader might otherwise have found to be self-pity; the suffering of the protagonist is asserted to be a "farce" or "joke." It is possible, of course, that it is those who are prone to see pain as a laughing matter who are implicitly attacked, but the temptation to interpret the poems this way should probably be resisted in view of the tone of the language. This appears to be mock heroic in "Lugete O Veneres," where the elaborate classical prosody of "or the tear of his anguish drips down on his arm cold and mottled" is followed by the bathos of "like a bar of blue soap" —
anaplectic, but brusque, and no doubt deliberately crude in sentiment. In
"Nails and a Cross," too, the "mystery-born" is stripped from grandeur
by the colloquialism of "here's an end to adventurings" and the
humorous (?) "I see, if I squint, my blood of death / drip on the little
harsh grass beneath" (emphasis added).

No doubt the protagonist is fully humanized as a result of Mason's
lack of reverence, but the irony is more delicate in some places than
others. It is difficult to see why, for example, the poor boy of "Lugete O
Veneres" should be mourned "for a space" only. One suspects that the
poet is treating his own romanticism with rather too much brute force.

The more typical note, however, is that of a romanticism which does
not show itself in its very antidote (a spasmodic attempt to stamp out a
Shelleyan kind of sensitive self-pity), but reveals more openly and
honestly that it exists, even if dramatically and ironically presented. An
interesting further example of irony working in favour of the "I" is
"After Death" (p. 27). This poem pictures a blissful place to succeed our
earthly existence. One of the ironies is that, contrary to much
fashionable moaning, the afterlife is seen as a replica of the present one;
another is, however, that if this logic is accepted, then it must follow that
it is also true for the poet himself, and since he is persistently unhappy
now (thus is the implication), he will inevitably be so "after death." The
poem is to be taken in conjunction with the next one (referred to before),
"Old Memories of Earth"; there, it is the past that "such / as these"
remember as some sort of paradise, and that the speaker has "never any
memories" of. (Weir, p. 15, is clearly mistaken in thinking that the
protagonist speaks from an afterlife.) Essentially, the irony of both of
these poems lies in their situation rather than the treatment of the
speaker, although certainly in "Old Memories of Earth" the speaker (the
non-Christ) is increasingly revealed as inadequate when even Christ's
presence hardly stirs him beyond a memory of some former friendship.
If, again, we read this poem in context, its successor, "The Vigil," raises
the serious possibility that the speaker of "Old Memories of Earth"
bears some similarity to Peter. Even then, all three poems may just as
much be intended to emphasize the irony of the modern situation we find
ourselves in as to blame any of the three protagonists.

Still, distinctions are to be observed between the pitiful "I" of "After
Death" and the Peter-like "I" of "The Vigil," or the Judas of "Judas
Iscariot" (p. 57). Mason certainly is aware of a difference between
Christ's time (or any past) and the present, but even more central in his
poetry is his inclination to myth-make his own situation into one where
he, in his romantic imagination and sensitivity, becomes a Christ-like
victim for whom no happiness is possible but only suffering, and his
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opponents – viewed no less extremely – have characteristics diametrically opposite and hostile. The bitterness of “Judas Iscariot” rests in part of this vision, and is expressed in ironic sarcasm. For example, it is not Christ – or Mason – who has poetic eloquence, but Judas, who “would sing like the thrush” “on the thorn” of the victim’s suffering. The point of the poem is missed if we overlook the implied contrast between Judas and Christ-Mason in too intense a preoccupation with the former. The significance of Judas’ singing like a thrush is reinforced, for example, by “Their Sacrifice” (p. 76), which speaks of a Christ-like figure being hanged “while the thrushes sing.” We are to see once again that the lack of voice on the part of Christ-Mason is primarily due to the tormentors: it is they who can sing, while the poet, in his suffering, is silenced by them just as Christ was before.7

To stress the suffering of the victim is not, however, to deny that the irony in this poem or others is used with very forceful and aggressive effect. What is obvious here is not merely the poet’s myth making, or at least insofar as it involves a romantic dichotomy, but also his social criticism. While we need to see that the poem is highly sensitive, we must not ignore its vigour and awareness of the way some men, at least, really act. There is nothing totally unrealistic about the picture of Judas as the example of someone who sings, is “greatly / given to laughter,” and shows his hypocrisy not only in this but also in his pose as the “veriest / prince of good fellows / and the whitest.” The irony in a case like this is biting, emphasizing that it is exactly the person whom one would be most charmed by who is the greatest sham and the blackest villain.

The presentation of this poem is highly dramatic, with the meaning coming across only through telling hints in the language which are to be understood in the context of other poems. The irony is less apparent than in most of the first-person poems, although its presence can hardly be doubted and is best realized once we have come to see how Mason views himself (and his opponents) in poems not written in the third person.

The ironic emphasis on the contrast between appearance and reality is in “Judas Iscariot” used in a direction opposite to that of “On the Swag,” which immediately precedes it. In “On the Swag” Mason uses three characters: the beggar-Christ (here perhaps not an image for himself), the cook who represents the victim’s materialistic opponent, and a speaker about whom we learn nothing other than it is he who points out that the man who seems no more than an “old lag” in fact is Christ. Not only are we to understand, apparently, that we must not misjudge a man by his external appearance, but, particularly if the poem is read together with “Judas Iscariot,” the conclusion seems inescapable that men are ironically bound to be the very reverse of what they look like. If so, Mason’s notion of an inevitable relation between what on the
one hand seems and on the other hand is must be regarded as not just ironic but also partly romantic; it fantasizes about what is not known to be reality but hoped to be the case. The idea that there is somehow merit in poverty and evil in wealth is one frequently encountered in the work of New Zealand writers, for example in Sargeson or Frame, both of whom, like Mason, are romantic in this element of their thinking. To state this is not to voice an objection against the artistic impact of what Mason achieves through his irony in these poems; one may, however, question the correctness of his vision once that comes to be analyzed.

Although the presentation in such poems is even more dramatic than in those which use a first-person speaker ironically, the basic dichotomy is not very different, namely that between a hypocritical, treacherous and cruel materialist and an honest, pitiable, sensitive and poor victim – an underdog who is either any kind of “beggar” or Christ or Mason, and often a combination of these. That the Christ of these poems is often to be thought of as for one thing an image for Mason is possibly a little less evident than in the first-person poems, but remains very likely if the poems are not read in isolation from each other. For example, “The Leave-Taking” (p. 74) contains only one explicit reference to Judas, but that very circumstance implies that the dead man buried in the poem is – or is very like – Christ, yet the unobtrusive but firmly directed references to “the wintry side / of the harsh green hill” here and for example the “cruel grey breakers” of “The Vigil” (p. 29) establish the scene as New Zealand. Even then, Mason is discreet enough not to point merely in his own direction, but at the very least the irony of a poem like this is both more intelligible and more potent if we perceive that there is an implied resemblance between the circumstances of Christ’s death and what happens in the New Zealand of Mason’s time. “The Leave-Taking,” a beautiful yet rather neglected poem, abounds in significant ironies. The “dead man” is buried, “as he had willed,” in complete silence by what are presumably his disciples, or, in the modern situation, his friends. The silence covers deep suffering:

Only their eyeballs
flickered in pain
as their scorpion sorrow
gnawed at their brain.

It is a silence which speaks rather than a silence of emptiness and politeness, and it is not unlike that of the dead man. Indeed, the parallel is drawn: “It was as though / they all had died.” The dead man, we may presume, has been silenced by his society; now he silences his friends, and in part it is this very silence, imposed by others, which appears to
cause suffering. Relief – and this is the greatest irony of the poem – is brought by the arch-traitor, the only one who even now disobeys Christ:

one of those lovers
broke into a moan
with an ancient voice
that was not his own

And he called as only
the hopeless can
with a throat like Judas
“there goes a good man.”

It is this man, human despite himself, who articulates (in contrast to the silent “Christ” and the other “lovers”) the very grief which he has caused, most of all, it now seems, to himself; and the final stanza expresses how this “hopeless” outcast who – ironically but rightly – receives compassion from his fellows who are restored back to life by weeping for him, and, through him, for the Christ who had asked for “never a word”:

At the cry of him tortured
their poor faces leapt
into life once again
and they wept.

The complexity of this poem goes well beyond that of most, which tend to present a moving but rather melodramatic contrast between the victim and his opponents. The poem idealizes “Christ” less and sympathizes with “Judas” more, creating a profoundly balanced view that seems to me non-romantic. But in any case Mason’s handling of the Christian myth is more varied, and also less certain and self-indulgent than one might suppose. Let us for example briefly consider “Ecce Homunculus” (p. 59). This poem about the crucifixion ends with the sestet:

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 image of Christ as one who “brazened it out” with a “gallant mask” receives extra poignancy when compared with the final words of the preceding octave, which speaks of Christ making “sarcely a moan when his soft flesh was nailed.” Yet, no less ironical than the very
human courage and suffering of the hero is his cry "Divine am I . . . " when weighed against the evidence of heaven not only not confirming it but also against Mason’s implicit claim that any sign from heaven could at the most have been "indifferent." Here we get a note so far not considered in this essay yet typical of this author: doubt (or even dissatisfaction) about "heaven" as much as other people.

It may well be that the end, "while he was passed by even the worst of men at least sour wine," is intended to imply an ironic contrast between Mason and Christ. Certainly this interpretation appears to be possible in the light of "If the drink . . . " (p. 53), where Mason speaks of his verses as "sponges steeped in vinegar . . . handy for the crucified."8 (As though he is addressing fellow victims.)

According to this interpretation, Mason would present himself as ironically even worse treated than Christ, and we would read, "while he was passed . . . " However, it may be that Mason is far more doubtful about what happened and about his own importance, if we take him to mean that in contrast to "heaven," the worst of men at least gave Christ sour wine. Even then it remains possible to think of Christ as representing Mason, but we cannot be sure; and the final painful irony may well be that Christ (Mason) has not been so much betrayed by humans as by God.

Certainly the poems - and perhaps particularly the later ones - do not leave us confident about God’s benevolence towards man, and in that respect alone, even, make Mason proportionately less self-pitying or self-righteous than if his battle had been merely with his society.

Most often, Mason implies a contrast between Christ as the supreme man (as in "Arius Prays," p. 108) and God the Father, who either is less kind to man and too aloof, or does not (perhaps) exist, although "In Manus Tuas Domine" (p. 78) appears to convey the ironic notion that "our enemies" will be "storming up the hill" while we might be foolish enough to think that there is point in putting our fate in the hands of "Christ our Lord."9 In "Their Sacrifice" (p. 76), as in "The Spark’s Farewell to Its Clay" (p. 38), Mason means us to observe the contrast between the conventional God with capital G, and what God in our time has probably become to most (or so Mason seems to suspect) as well as himself. That is, in "Their Sacrifice" Mason first optimistically calls out, "And so God rest him / guard-gyved gallows-given!" but ends his poem with "the priest mumbles / of what god hallows / but fruit the gallows / give for offering" (emphasis added). Contrary to the beginning of the poem, its conclusion seems to be that one’s faith is surely belied by one’s subsequent realization that a deity who supposedly "hallows" this kind of event hardly deserves the name, or is merely called upon, in thoughtlessness or evil, to sanction man’s cruelty and insignificance.
(What begins as a seemingly grand sacrifice of man to God ends with the mumbling priest in the company of a fumbling hangman.) The irony of this poem is to me more subtle and telling than the often-quoted “God knows what I have gained” in “The Spark’s Farewell,” where the double entendre essentially has the same meaning, but finds less support in what has happened within the body of the poem that it finishes. The effect depends more on sheer verbal ingenuity, although certainly Mason is successful enough in jolting us into an awareness of the contrast between superficial (but perhaps justified) and more serious (but perhaps unwarranted) linguistic usage.

It does not seem necessary to discuss in any detail other poems that similarly depend on an ironic awareness that God (or Jesus) cannot or will not save man. Jesus appears in his customary pitiful role, but ill-treated by “heaven” as much as man, in “The Seventh Wound Protests” (p. 107), with the pathetic final cry “Seven, seven / Seven are the deadly wounds that call out against heaven.” But in “Lullaby and Neck-Verse” (p. 110) the contrast appears to be between the faith of the mother saying, “Jesus watches over you, who died in Calvary” and what happens to the child once grown up, when he is confronted with “A lank snake of a rope,” presumably because Jesus, who was himself deserted by “God” or “heaven” as we have seen in some poems, cannot actually be expected to come to the rescue when some other victim is treated the same way. Mason’s attitude to Christ, however (except once or twice, perhaps), is not one of criticism, as in the case of the Father, who either forsakes man indifferently or malignantly, or is the sort of cruel Jupiter figure that Blake and Shelley claimed man had merely been inventing for himself but did not finally exist.

What now we need to be primarily concerned with as we approach the end of our exploration is the occurrence (and function) of ironies so far overlooked, or at least only briefly discussed. I do not mean that subsequent instances will not prove consonant with what we have seen, but that my analysis, concentrating on what I consider to be the central dichotomy in the poems, must now take into account that irony also occurs in poems not, or at least not so conspicuously, preoccupied with this dichotomy.

One device characteristic of this poet is to make his irony dependent on the reader comparing what is not mentioned with what is. This, I think, lies in part behind “Judas Iscariot,” for example, but also behind “A Doubt” (p. 49), which is generally considered to be less important, but which nevertheless makes its point quite tellingly by, surely, implying that we are to think of a doubting poem like “The Agnostic” (p. 26) yet stating quite firmly, in effect, that there is absolutely no doubt about man’s returning to “clay” – the doubt of the poem ironically and
painfully being that the poet is uncertain whether he was told about his certainty or knew it anyway. The poem procures its own aesthetic delight and shock value even though less memorable than masterpieces like "Ecce Homunculus."

In some poems where the irony depends more on linguistic register we have already noted it to be somewhat spasmodic and forced, and this category contains among others also, I feel, “Vengeance of Venus” (p. 89) and “Ad Mariam” (p. 112) with its rather too heavy-handed final “pass the milk.” By contrast, the tone of “Stoic Overthrow” (p. 77) is so subtle that one at first does not suspect that possibly Mason is using some irony at once slightly to mock his own sensitivity and yet to evoke sympathy for one (or people) who must suffer so much and try so bravely to cope:

Tomorrow town and village  
will see the foemen pour  
down to devour the tillage  
that we shall eat no more  
and rape and burn and pillage  
those whom we loved of yore:  
we shall sleep and not heed.

The gravest irony in this situation is that perhaps all one can do, however absurdly, in the face of such overpowering disaster, is to “sleep and not heed.” The reader who may sway between the extremes of utter sympathy or contempt for the victims is probably to reach a poised judgement which takes account of the possibility that it is ironic that those who know so much about what will happen to their loved ones will not protect them while at the same time the poet who has started off with “Let us laugh with the dying,” cannot be considered to reprimand them. The extreme sobriety of the tone throws into relief the wealth of feeling behind it; the two are ironically juxtaposed.

The subtlety of tone is to be observed also in other poems which seemingly adopt an extreme stance but only in fact to call even that, at least to some extent, into question. For example, if the poems are read, as they ought to be, as belonging to one world, it becomes clear that Mason must be aware of the contrast between seeing his love as “our straw-built folly” (“Our Love,” p. 70) while only two pages before (in “Since Flesh,” p. 68) he has been asking, “is not all good / held in her thighs?” — a rhetorical question which includes its own affirmative answer, but which, in view of the very exaggeration of its assertion, very attractively (from an artistic point of view) seems to bring with it its own doubt. Similarly, as this poem expresses some nonchalance about the importance of being a known “name,” one finds here external evidence.
confirming that one is to feel some scepticism when confronted with the apparent confidence of such phrases as “Then I recall how my eternal fame / stands up too strong for Time to overthrow... I shall be known to many a mighty nation” in “Flattering Unction” (p. 61). Although such a poem looks back first and foremost at the Shakespeare of the sonnets, the sentiment, in conjunction with for example Mason’s calling himself “the old vagrant,” is more aptly described as Byronic. The grand romantic manner is used on the one hand to mock the poet’s intensity of feeling and on the other to highlight it. It is this kind of attitude (but not the language) which Mason immediately alludes to in that curiously ignored but extraordinarily powerful “Twenty-Sixth October” (p. 92):

I strode with a dry ironic gesture  
posing a high byronic posture  
towards your barred home, strutting the part  
of young man mocking broken heart.

However interesting and appealing the pose adopted, no affectation can finally withstand real romantic feeling; once he sees her house, “in one pulse the actor died”:

And through my heart wailed an old shrill  
wild keening that no art could kill  
an animal in lamentation  
for the dead of a long-dead nation:  
and in the macrocarpa trees  
I heard the sighing of the seas  
in some far ocean’s centre moan  
for strong men dead with seed unsown.

However, the irony is a double one. The major point accepted by the casual reader is that no acting is necessary, because the poet’s heart is seen to be “broken,” and neither can any “part” mock that fact; but the student of language will observe that the true voice of feeling surges forward on a kind of rhetoric not dissimilar to that of “Then I recall how my eternal fame / stands up too strong for Time to overthrow.”

One major example of an ironic poem still needs to be considered: “Latter-Day Geography Lesson” (p. 40), of which I shall quote the first stanza as perhaps sufficiently representative:

This, quoth the Eskimo master  
was London in English times:  
step out a little faster  
you two young men at the last there  
the Bridge would be on our right hand.
and the Tower near where those crows stand—
we struck it you'll recall in Gray's rhymes:
this, quoth the Eskimo master
was London in English times.

This deservedly popular piece perhaps lacks the subtlety and delicacy—perhaps the profundity—of some of the poems discussed, but it has different merits which make it exciting reading. The origin probably lies in “Ozymandias” (Weir, p. 61, refers to Mason’s admiration for Shelley); but Mason is more humorously imaginative in introducing his Eskimo master to comment on the transitoriness of imperial power, and his irony is less simplistic. Shelley’s irony, more romantically, is that what seemed so very grand in due course becomes like nothing; not only is this what happens, it is also what as a romantic reformer Shelley wants to happen. While no doubt Mason shows gleeful pleasure at the decline of the British empire as he foresees it, he is not envisaging some romantic revolution of the Shelleyan or Blakean kind. For the Eskimo is decidedly not, as Weir (p. 22) would have us believe, some sort of a “romantic primitive.” On the contrary, the final ironic twist of the poem (perfectly obvious even in the stanza quoted) is that the seeming “primitive” who succeeds when all of the Tower that remains are its crows is himself very typically the new arrogant, martial master that the energy of the language with its biting sarcasm would so much like to dispose of.

Insofar as the ironies of the poem clearly rest on a savage, bitter hatred of the attitudes attacked and probably finally imply, as Shelley did, that the power based on them will never last, we are reading a poem by a sensitive romantic indulging in a dream; but, patently, the poet also knows the dream to be untrue, and in this respect the irony expresses realistic awareness. Mason uses his irony for a multitude of purposes, as we have seen. It may accentuate his suffering or his longing, even if in the very act of countering his romantic vision of himself. On the other hand, it does provide some antidote to what could have become, and sometimes is, an excess of personal feeling. The most attractive poems, it seems to me, are those which play off such opposing tendencies against each other in subtle fashion. But whatever final attitude adopted by the poet—and it is rarely (if ever) a purely realistic one—his irony gives perpetual artistic enrichment to his verse, which, thus is the irony of events, is now no longer what he described as a “song” which had “none to hear.”

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R.A.K. Mason's Poetry

NOTES

2. I refer to the first three poems in *R.A.K. Mason: Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1971). Further references to Mason's poems are to this book and are incorporated in the text.

3. The chief of these, substantially speaking, are Charles Doyle, *R.A.K. Mason* (New York: Twayne, 1970), and J.E. Weir, *R.A.K. Mason* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977) (further references to the latter are incorporated in the text). There are several valuable comments in shorter discussions, which are quoted by these authors or referred to in their bibliographies. No previous critic has forestalled the present discussion; indeed I am at a loss to understand the sort of comment Weir, for example, makes about "The Beggar" as a poem which "seems to have issued almost unshaped from a precocious adolescent imagination"; nor can I share his doubt about "the extent to which Mason had rational control over the poetic devices of the poem" (p. 12).

4. See note 1.

5. The persona of this poem (or of "Oils and Ointments," p. 46) is hardly likely to be Mary Magdalene, as Weir (pp. 22-23) seems to think: why would she twice say "though I am but weak and poor"? And why would Mason present Christ as coming "to my door / riding upon an ass"? Furthermore, the speaker of "Oils and Ointments" is presumably in no way criticized.

6. The poet's attitude to some extent also reminds one of "The Young Man Thinks of Sons" (p. 60), where the puritanical assertions seem equally strident and unnatural. As Weir points out (p. 42), "on the emotional level it seeks fulfilment and thus contends with the basic argument of the poem."

7. It is, after examination, clear from the poem itself that Mason wishes us to see a contrast between Judas' melodiousness and his own (supposed) lack of it, but see for further confirmation Weir, pp. 38-39, who refers interestingly to an earlier version of the poem in which Mason's sense of personal involvement is more explicit.

8. The tragic (yet almost humorous) irony of "handy" should not escape us.

9. In other words, Mason in this poem (exceptionally) does not seem to view Christ as man rather than God.

10. Namely the contrast between the martyr's (Mason's) sensitivity and good efforts on the one hand and the indifference, or more often the active cruelty, of his enemies - men or God - on the other. The vast majority of the poems dated (in *Collected Poems*) 1923-34 are concerned with this, and they are the bulk of the verse Mason cared to preserve for posterity. Significantly, the small group of poems dated 1936-41 are far less ironic; one suspects that Mason grew too interested in the sentiments voiced in such narrowly political verse as "Youth at the Dance" (p. 85), though fortunately even some of the later writing contains fine irony.