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Joost Daalder

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### **Abstract**

Close reading of poems - except in the classroom - has become rather unfashionable as an academic discipline. In the case of the New Zealand poet R.A.K. Mason, the result has been unfortunate. It is really no exaggeration to say that we have hardly yet begun to consider just what these poems mean. They are far more enigmatic - and far less easily typecast - than discussions of individual examples by J.E. Weir or Charles Doyle (Mason's major critics so far) would suggest.'

# Ambiguity and Ambivalence in R.A.K. Mason

Close reading of poems — except in the classroom — has become rather unfashionable as an academic discipline. In the case of the New Zealand poet R.A.K. Mason, the result has been unfortunate. It is really no exaggeration to say that we have hardly yet begun to consider just what these poems mean. They are far more enigmatic — and far less easily typecast — than discussions of individual examples by J.E. Weir or Charles Doyle (Mason's major critics so far) would suggest.<sup>1</sup> In defence of these commentators, it must be conceded that the poems have their difficulties. It is tempting to see them as conveying one attitude in a rather austere or even clumsy manner. My own inclination has been to see the Christ figure in the poems as a disguise for the poet himself, victimized by New Zealand society. I would still maintain that this view is legitimate, but I have come to realize that it is incomplete. What is more important is that no matter whether Mason saw himself as Christ or not, his attitude to the Christ figure is ambivalent.

Such critical discoveries are only to be arrived at through prolonged and careful attention to the language of the poems, and in particular to its ambiguity. It is not my intention to suggest that the ambiguity is confined to Mason's handling of the Christ figure, but in this paper I shall chiefly confine myself to that figure which I believe to be central to and typical of his poems. I hope the reader will bear with me while I examine one of Mason's best known poems in some detail — not in A to Z fashion, but with concern for some of the poem's ambiguities and the possibility that they reveal ambivalence, or at least a richness of meaning, rather than trivial word games or ineptitude. My first example is 'Ecce Homunculus':<sup>2</sup>

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.

One reason why a reader may consider some of the grammatical connections, at least, ambiguous is that the poem is thinly punctuated. Weir refers to Mason's journal, 'I find it very hard in writing to know just how to punctuate properly, especially just where I ought to put the commas'. Doyle, who discusses the poem with attention to a few of the words and phrases, appears to see a similar clumsiness, claiming that in 'mid-octet there is some momentary confusion as to whether Christ or Pilate is being described' and complaining about the lack of precise status of 'indifferent or malignant'.

I do not think that Mason's comments about his punctuation can be taken at face value. There can be only one reason why he inserts a comma after 'querulous': the fact that he wants to avoid the confusion which Doyle accuses him of. If the comma had not been there, 'confusion as to whether Christ or Pilate is being described' would have been possible. Indeed, since no punctuation occurs before this comma, it would have been logical for us to conclude that 'perplexed and querulous' refers to the same person as 'lustily assailed'. The presence of the comma can only indicate that two separate persons are being described, and it is at once obvious that 'lustily assailed' continues the series 'Betrayed by friend', 'dragged from the garden', etc.

In other words, there is no ambiguity or confusion here, not even 'momentary confusion', since the comma which creates a moment's thought is a clear marker. But Doyle has a better point with regard to 'indifferent or malignant' in the penultimate line of the poem, at least in the sense that the precise status of that *is* hard to determine (whether or not it ought to be easier is a different critical question).

Theoretically, and particularly in view of the enjambement after 'sign', we might connect 'indifferent or malignant' with either that word or with 'that inscrutable darkness'. But Mason is not likely to mean that heaven might or should have given an indifferent or malignant sign. In other words, the grammatical ambiguity is probably an indication of ineptitude rather than intention. Mason's point must be that Christ construed the darkness as a sign of his divinity, but that the darkness itself was merely inscrutable (not a sign of anything) and did not produce a confirmatory sign either, acting with indifference to Christ's and our feelings, or even malignantly, in withholding a sign. The true ambiguity, here, is that of Mason's attitude to Christ. With one part of his mind, Mason appears to think that heaven should have given a sign, and that its failure to do so is a shortcoming. Yet at the same time, we may, with Christ, believe that the darkness actually itself *is* a sign, and that no other sign is needed. In that case, any comment on heaven being either indifferent or malignant is simply beside the point.

Fundamentally, then, Mason is here torn between two quite different impulses: that of the believer and that of the sceptic. And the believer would like to feel what the sceptic rather crudely rejects. The sceptic certainly comes to the fore when Mason contemplates the workings of 'heaven', but the figure of Christ makes him wonder. Should we believe, like Christ, that heaven takes a benevolent interest in us? Can we believe that we are divine, or at least that Christ was? These are questions raised by the picture of Christ's suffering, and delicately offered as possibilities for us to reflect upon rather than that anything definite is asserted despite the seeming confidence of the claim that heaven 'gave no sign'.

The contradiction between this claim and Christ's is no doubt exactly what we are meant to ponder rather than think that Mason does not know what he is doing or wishes us to reject Christ's view. Other expressions in the poem are similarly meant to stimulate our thinking and feeling about Christ. For example, in line 2, is Christ 'lord in mockery' or hailed as such? Or has he been hailed, in mockery, as no more than a pseudo-lord? In line 5, is an expression like 'every righteous Hebrew' merely sarcastic/ironic, or also to be taken at face value? In all probability, Mason has calculated the effect of the language very exactly and in such a way that one may postulate that a phrase like this on the one hand expresses something which he really feels while on the other it is meant to be interpreted as something from which he ironically detaches himself. If so, 'though that inscrutable darkness gave no sign/ indifferent or malignant' may also have a similar status of a statement which the author partly believes and partly rejects.

Enough has been said about this poem for it to serve as an example for my argument generally. I am not taking into account the question of Mason's identification with Christ. It is possible that at the end Mason is not merely drawing a contrast between 'heaven' and 'even the worst of men', but also between himself and Christ — if we put heavy emphasis on *he* in the second but last line. Contrary to what I once thought,<sup>3</sup> I do not believe that this ambiguity is as clear, or as significant, as the ambivalence displayed in the way Christ himself is approached.

I am at a loss to understand Doyle's opinion that the 'gallant mask' at the beginning of the sestet shows an 'unsatisfactory ambiguity'. I find the ambiguity highly satisfactory, not merely because it is artistically interesting, but because it reveals a profound ambivalence in Mason's attitude to Christ. In the end, the poet's attitude is surely even more important than his language.

Similarly with a poem like 'Judas Iscariot'. Many are inclined to see the poem as praising, or at least celebrating the vitality of, Judas. My own reaction used to be contrary to this, postulating that Judas is treated with irony. I now think that the poet has an ambivalent attitude to both Judas and Christ.

Coming to the poem with a sense of context, one may well assume that it is critical of Judas. Judas betrayed Christ, and it would be logical for Mason to count on his readers condemning Judas's action, apart even from the fact that Mason shows a persistent preoccupation with Christ which, at least at times, is sympathetic rather than critical, for example in 'Oils and Ointments' and 'On the Swag'. There is no reason, however, why Mason's attitude should be conventional, and it need not be consistent from poem to poem. Even so, such circumstances as I mention do support the view that Mason does not approve of Judas. Non-poetic comments, too, are to this effect: Weir quotes Mason's statement that 'the main source of human sorrow may well lie in the man acting cheerfully and blindly in his own interest' — a statement easily applicable to Judas in this poem, 'cheerfully' being the most revealing word. The image of Judas as a thrush is something we should remember when reading 'Their Sacrifice', which speaks of 'the man they're hanging/ while the thrushes sing'; returning to 'Judas Iscariot', we can only feel less enthusiastic about thrushes than before. In fact, Mason appears to contrast Judas's ability to sing with the fact that Christ is 'voiceless' at the end of 'In Perpetuum Vale' and that his own 'voice is cracked and harsh' in 'Song of Allegiance'.

At the same time, though, it is difficult to resist the feeling that the poem does not *only* criticize Judas, but shares some of his vitality. There

is the confident eloquence of the language to begin with, singing 'like the thrush' rather than the product of a 'cracked and harsh' voice. And whatever one's intellectual reservations, one's natural instinct readily responds to a man 'greatly given to laughter', living 'gay as a cricket'. And this reaction can be rationally defended by referring to 'Arius Prays' where Christ is asked: 'Be with us Lord not only with our best/ but *when we mock your name and scoff and rail*' (my italics).

This whole poem sees Christ emphatically as a *human* figure with a body 'not to be saved' and a soul which 'drank with the rest annihilation's drink'; Christ is not above us, and for this reason can be asked to be 'with us' even when we are Judases. One presumes that Mason, while on the one hand viewing Judas as a villain and Christ as his noble victim, on the other hand is working towards a vision that, in line with his growing Marxism, will see both as belonging to a common brotherhood of men.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to assume that Mason would regard criticism of Christ as sacrilegious. No doubt the poet's predominant attitude is one of sympathy rather than rejection, but it is not always one of respect for Christ. Let us for example consider 'Nails and a Cross', which starts off with lines which may well arouse our unmixed sympathy and even respect: 'Nails and a cross and crown of thorn,/ here I die the mystery-born.'

The succeeding lines alter our reaction by their colloquialism:

here's an end to adventurings  
here all great and valiant things  
find as far as I'm concerned a grave.

Clearly, if Christ himself can speak with such lack of solemnity about his role, we are to consider the possibility that he has been indulging in some rather grandiose postures. And the disrespect for Christ thus tentatively provoked within us grows into something more certain in the lines of the final stanza:

And I see, if I squint, my blood of death  
drip on the little harsh grass beneath  
...  
and while the troops divide up my cloak  
the mob fling dung and see the joke.

One possible meaning is that what Christ or the poet sees is not a joke at all, and that we are to recognize a painful gulf between the true tragedy and the mistaken feeling of the mob. But it is also possible to take the lines as conveying to us that what the mob see truly is a joke,

from Christ's and the poet's viewpoint. In this case, the 'joke' could, sarcastically, be that Christ realizes (and the poet with him) that He has been given 'death for a jest' as 'Arius Prays' states immediately before. But the most obvious sense is that the event is a joke, not because of what God does or fails to do, but because what Christ does is amusing and funny. Shocking though the idea in a sense is, even Christ himself appears to be presented as aware of the humorousness of being reduced from 'great and valiant things' to someone who has to 'squint' to perceive the blood dripping 'on the little harsh grass'.

To stress the humour of the situation is not to deny neither its tragedy, nor an element of sarcastic complaint. But it is to insist that Mason's attitude to Christ is ambivalent, and that we cannot and should not deny that fact. In support of my quotation of 'Nails and a Cross', I should like to quote 'Lullaby and Neck-Verse':

Oh snuggle down, my baby, your cheek is soft and warm

*A stubble beard unkempt*

And sleep you now soundly safe on your mother's arm

*Wild oats have threshed out hemp*

Ah nestle down safe on your loving mother's knee

*There is not any hope*

While Jesus watches over you, who died on Calvary

*A lank snake of a rope.*

There is a contrast here between the hopeful attitude of the mother to her Christ-like baby and what the italicized lines reveal to us as likely to be the painful reality. That Christ 'died on Calvary' is a fact which can be viewed in two ways: we can accept it gladly as bringing salvation ('Jesus watches over you') or as a grim end because 'There is not any hope'. Presumably Mason wants to alert us to the possibility that the baby will die a meaningless death because Christ's watching will not help; vice versa, contemplation of the baby's end seems to make Mason feel that Christ's death was equally final and futile. But such pessimism does not exclude sympathy with, and possibly belief in the rightness of, the mother's view. The physical reality of death does not make faith impossible, even though we may feel tempted towards despair.

The poet's ambiguous presentation of Christ or Christ-like figures may be evident within one and the same poem, but also when two poems are compared with each other, for example 'Oil and Ointments' and 'Tribute'. The former poem appears to express unmixed, almost sentimental sympathy with Christ. We may suspect that the poet imagines Christ as having a 'longing foot' because he identifies too closely with his hero (in 'Song of Allegiance', immediately before, Mason complains

about his own 'bloody knees'). 'Tribute', by contrast, is a good deal more subtle, and although I am predominantly inclined to read the poem as ironic at the expense of the speaker, we may also see it as sharing a legitimate complaint with him. The speaker explains that he offered hospitality to Christ who came to his door riding upon an ass. He twice mentions that he is 'weak and poor', and Mason may indicate that the speaker shows undue preoccupation with his own state rather than Christ's; also, that the speaker exhibited materialistic, showy extravagance when he lit 'every torch' even 'though it was all brightest day'. At the end of the poem the speaker says that he spilled all his wine and wasted all his unguents, and this may be his fault rather than Christ's. Even so, Christ appears to reject a well-meant gift, and may be considered insensitive and arrogant in doing this.

My argument could be extended to several more poems in which Mason is not preoccupied with Christ, but with other (sometimes related) figures about whom he allows us to feel doubt, as for example in 'The Beggar'. Most frequently, however, the poet seems to raise for us, in brilliantly ambivalent poems, questions of the utmost importance about the worth and meaning of Christ, both as a human figure and as one that may have religious significance. His doubts are no doubt widely shared, and, since they are by no means trivial, this poet deserves an audience in many countries — not just New Zealand. As a Dutchman living in Australia, I feel that my admiration for this poet cannot possibly be parochial. Furthermore, although Mason's concerns are characteristic of our century, there is no reason for regarding them as limited in any way. It always has been, and it always will be, possible to view things the way he does, because those 'things' are central to human existence in spite of certain historical changes. The ambiguity of the poems is not a matter of technical trickery: it is valuable because of the poet's skill, but even more so because of the breadth of his vision. That breadth is not superficial or vaguely non-committal, but the result of honest, intense probing.

#### NOTES

1. J.E. Weir, *R.A.K. Mason* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977); Charles Doyle, *R.A.K. Mason* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969). Both critics also refer to other writers and give some account of their work.
2. See R.A.K. Mason, *Collected Poems* (Christchurch: The Pegasus Press, new ed. 1971, from which I quote throughout). The title, 'Ecce Homunculus', is probably an ironic version of 'Ecce Homo'. Christ is presented as 'a little man', and thus both less grand and more pathetic than many are inclined to think.

3. My earlier approach to this and other poems was based on the assumption that Mason was constantly presenting himself as Christ, or at least drawing comparisons between his own situation and Christ's. I develop this view in a paper, 'R.A.K. Mason: the Poet as a Pacific Christ', for a book being published jointly by the East-West Center in Hawaii and the CRNLE at Flinders.

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