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The Religious Experience in R.A.K. Mason's Poetry

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WHEN I FIRST READ R.A.K. MASON'S POEMS several years ago, I was inclined to see the Christ figure in them as essentially – or at least most frequently – a reflection of the author himself, in the role of a victim of his New Zealand society circa 1920–30 (Daalder 1981a). I do not resign from this view now to the extent of thinking it seriously mistaken. But I have come to see that Mason's portrayal of Christ is not as simple as I once thought, and my present awareness that there is more to it also prompts me to consider the more general question of the religious experience within Mason's poems.

Implicit in my earlier reading of the Christ figure as a portrait of the author was that he did not see Christ as God. Mason did not seem to be particularly interested in theological matters; rather, I thought, he identified with Christ as a quite extraordinary human figure. But if I was perhaps too one-sided in assuming that the poet identified with Christ, I may also have been wrong about the absence of the divine in Mason's view of things. In the present essay I therefore first of all will try to answer the question: can we, from a reading of the poems – in which the poet functions as such a very curious persona, even if perhaps not quite Christ – at all deduce whether Mason believed in God, and if so, in what kind of God? The question does not concern me greatly as one of biography; it is of vital importance, however, in any attempt to try to come to terms with how the poems have to be interpreted. Let us turn, then, to Mason's *Collected Poems* to try and see how he views the question of the existence of God.

At first the answer seems to be quite simple. After all, the second poem in the volume is called "The Agnostic." The poem proclaims that its protagonist "would serve unflinching in the fiery van" and in general shows his great zeal and enthusiasm to fight for worthwhile causes. It ends with: "But where's the van what's truth what's right what's wrong / I can make out no more than you my song" (Mason 1971: 26). There is nothing in this that belies the conventional dictionary definition of an agnostic as "one who holds that nothing is known, or likely to be known, of the existence of a God or of anything beyond material phenomena." I presume we are to take it that the poet feels an inclination to fight for truth and so on, but fears that he cannot know the nature of such things as truth because he

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cannot be sure of the existence of God. In this context, the question of God's existence seems rather academic. The poet shows great sense of purpose about his mission as a fighter, and it is somewhat hard to believe that he cannot proceed to act without first having certainty about God's existence. The poem does not really establish a connection between its concern for causes on the one hand and its interest in theological matters on the other.

Elsewhere, however, there is a much more acute relationship between these two issues. Not surprisingly, the question whether there is a God and, if so, of what nature, particularly occurs when the poet contemplates or experiences suffering. The suffering need not be his own. For example, in "On a Dead Cripple" Mason speaks about a crippled boy who died at the age of seven:

> God, if any god accords
> pain to dead men and rewards –
> to his clay you were not just –
> judge again now he is dust.
> King of Heaven, King of Hell,
> see you recompense him well. (Mason 1971: 101)

Admittedly, the poem shows uncertainty about God's existence. But it does make plain why the existence of God matters. The injustice, from an earthly point of view, of the crippled boy's early death would seem easier to bear if we knew that there was a God, and especially if he cared enough about suffering to compensate for it after the sufferer's death. In a perfectly normal way, God is seen to be necessary because no doubt he has a hand in what happens here, and can punish or reward us after death. What is perhaps less ordinary is that God is viewed as someone to whom one can almost give orders: he can be blamed for our suffering, and be told to set things right after death. Still, it does not seem to me un-Christian to suppose that God is responsible for what happens on earth where, as in this case, the sufferer cannot himself be held responsible. No doubt the deity's sense of justice is such that justice will be done in Heaven or Hell if someone has not been justly dealt with while alive.

Mason's sense of suffering, and particularly of death, was certainly strong, and I feel that more often than not it leads him to see God as existing but unjust. In many cases the speaker of the poems does not seem "agnostic" at all. Invariably, the physical event of death is regarded as painful, and usually there is no assurance that the soul will survive. Thus in "Since Flesh Is Soon" we read that "flesh is soon / as the spread dung," and this cheerful assertion is followed by "and the soul no more / than a song that is sung" (Mason 1971: 68). In other words, neither the body nor the soul will survive, and the implication appears to be that it is utterly regrettable that there will be no immortality of the soul to compensate for the demise of the body; for, although the soul's life does not last, the song that was sung was apparently enjoyable. God is not explicitly mentioned in such lines. But I do not think it irresponsible to suppose that a theological

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concern underlies them; why else would the poet speculate on the survival of both the body and the soul? It would seem that Mason is disappointed in a God who inflicts senseless suffering on us, both physically and spiritually, and both during this life and after it.

There are poems in which the poet appears to feel that he faces a godless world. However, it is perhaps more typical for him to suppose that God does exist, but has to be viewed with a degree of hostility as he does not alleviate our suffering, or even cruelly impose it upon us. The notion in "A Doubt" that "man the clay / to clay returns" is frequent, even without any reference to the soul (Mason 1971: 49). At other times the soul is mentioned, but in the confident belief that "my soul is not to save" (Mason 1971: 54). The poem from which I quote this statement, "Stoic Marching Song," does not seem to indicate that the soul simply ceases to live like the body. Rather, we must pay attention to the nature of the poet's defiance:

> Son of sorrow sire of sods
> still I gird back at the gods,
> boldly bear five feet eleven
> despite hell and earth and heaven. (Mason 1971: 54)

The sorrowful awareness that the soul is "not to save" appears to be connected with the poet's girding back "at the gods." It may at first seem tempting to believe that Mason feels that the gods are punishing him for some crime, and that therefore his soul cannot be saved; but the poem gives no hint of such a connection, and the idea that it exists is probably merely fanciful. More likely, the poet complains about the cruelty of gods who have created a world in which the soul can never be saved – as a matter of principle, so to speak.

While this notion may in its turn look implausible, I feel confident that the evidence elsewhere actually confirms its correctness. One of the central themes in Mason's poems is his belief that we live in a fundamentally irrational world which is made such by a God or gods taking delight in creating us as incapable of being saved both physically and spiritually. Part of our difficulty is that we believe – and are deluded into believing by the higher power(s) – that we exist not only for our present happiness but for some more profound purpose, for an eternal life which has significance. Christ was right to complain that God had abandoned him, for such indeed happened. Christ thought himself divine, and Mason sympathises with him in his delusion. But, as Christ himself finds in "Nails and a Cross," a delusion it is:

> Nails and a cross and crown of thorn,
> here I die the mystery-born:
> here's an end to adventurings
> here all great and valiant things
> find as far as I'm concerned a grave. (Mason 1971: 109)

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Mason allows himself a wry joke in "as far a I'm concerned." Seemingly colloquial and merely world-weary, the statement is employed by the poet, not by the Christ-persona, to indicate the enormity of the fact that Christ utters it; if he dies without surviving in any sense, merely finding a grave, then there is no hope at all for us. That is not to say that Christ is not "the mystery-born"; but his birth is no more or less of a mystery than anyone else's, for we are all in the same position. In fact, Christ's situation is more tragic, but also more seriously mistaken, than that of the mob who, at the time of the crucifixion, "fling dung and see the joke." Which joke? The cruel joke that God plays upon Christ and the rest of us in creating us to believe that he has provided our existence with a meaning which in the end we find to be totally absent.

None of this is to deny any of Christ's magnificence as a person. But Mason significantly rewrites the Christian myth. Since Christ is not, after all, God's son any more than anyone else is, Mason significantly entitles one of his best and richest poems not "Ecce Homo," let alone something more grandiose, but "Ecce Homunculus." Christ is not merely, disappointingly, a man, "homo," rather than God's son; he is even a "homunculus," a little man:

> 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. (Mason 1971: 59)

This poem is less of a shock than "Nails and a Cross," for the crucifixion is not, here, claimed to be a "joke." Still, God does not provide us with any comfort either. He may or may not agree with Christ's claim that for him "is heaven overcast"; what really matters is not so much whether that claim is correct or not, but that God withholds the sign that would enable us to tell that Christ is right.

In this sense God's intention is at best "indifferent" and at worst "malignant." A benevolent divinity would confirm the truth of Christ's claim. To the extent that the need for such a sign exists, "indifferent" virtually means "malignant," for God's refusal to solve our uncertainty, even if not actively ill-intentioned, can only prolong the agony that we are bound to feel while Christ's divinity is in doubt. Our sense of pain is increased by Christ's truly heroic faith, by the fact that he "boldly" went to die, did not really complain "when his soft flesh was nailed," and did not swerve

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from his conviction that he was divine. At the same time, the poet emphasises the truly human dimension of Christ by the use of the slightly pejorative note to be found in "he brazened it out right to the last" and "still wore the gallant mask." I do not think, however, that Christ is presented in a critical light. Rather, Mason wishes to stress how mistaken we are in our common view of him as God's son. More importantly, he emphasises the wrongness of our attitude to the Father, as we conventionally call him, the divinity whose existence Mason does not doubt *per se*, but whose lack of kindness he contrasts with the conduct of "the worst of men" who gave Christ "sour wine." To say that Mason dislikes God-the-Father is not to say he has no religion. Predominantly, at least, the poems are religious in the sense that they recognise a superhuman controlling power. What they are not prepared to grant is that that power is benign. And things normally seen to depend on that power, such as the immortality of the soul, are quite logically, given the premise, not granted either. Inasmuch as Christ is not divine and in that sense is not God's son, it is obviously a mistake to speak of "the Father."

In this view of things, the existence of a divine creator is recognised, but he is regarded with hostility. Christ then becomes the nearest thing to a benign divinity, not as a superhuman power, but someone we can pray to as a fellow-human who cares. Thus for example in "Arius Prays":

> Oh do not pass them by dear Christ who think
> that you were compounded in the common way
> framed of impetuous blood and fallible clay,
> that your blood was made not to be saved but sink
> down to the murderous grave, therein to stink
> in foul corruption, on that evil day
> by Golgotha – and your soul they say
> drank with the rest annihilation's drink
>
> Be with us Lord not only with our best
> but when we mock your name and scoff and rail:
> laugh with us like a man not like a god
> a cruel god who gives death for a jest:
> be with us dead man when our feet halt and fail
> in that hard road your clumsy feet once trod. (Mason 1971: 108)

This poem seems to sum up much of what I have discussed so far. We may wonder whether Mason actually believes in a God at all. The expression "a cruel god" could refer to something merely fanciful, something that has no existence outside our imagination, in the manner of, say, Blake's Nobodaddy and Shelley's Jupiter. However, the fact of death which has been given as a jest is undeniable, and probably the existence of a cruel God is equally real. In any case the poem emphatically asserts Christ's manhood as distinct from his divinity, as that is conventionally understood. Christ has not survived in heaven, is not a godhead, but in the end merely "a dead man," even though he is addressed as "Lord." I take it that he is our Lord in that he was the first to tread "that hard road" which we all will

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have to tread at the time of our death, when we discover not only the reality and pain of it as a physical event, but also become aware of our complete annihilation. Inasmuch as Christ survives, he exists in our minds, and this fact – rather than his continued existence as some objective entity – makes it possible for him still to be "with us" if we pray to him. I see no reason to doubt that Mason is among those who "think / that you [Christ] were compounded in the common way"; but he is also one to pray to Christ as a fellow-sufferer who as such can comfort us.

Christ thus also becomes the figure of the fellow-rebel against the harsh creator, God. For example, in "The Seventh Wound Protests," the first six wounds of Jesus do nothing other than announce that his death is near, but his seventh wound complains: "Seven, seven / Seven are the deadly wounds that call out against heaven" (Mason 1971: 107). Christ's complaint that God has deserted him is merely archetypal for our human condition. In the early twentieth century, and in New Zealand, it is possible for Mason to feel exactly the same, 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? (Mason 1971: 55)

The title of the poem seems to me essentially ironic. There has been no "evolution" to speak of, except that perhaps at an earlier time it would not have been possible to see that God's unfeeling attitude towards his victims is like that of a scientist towards mice. It is a mistake to think, however, as the speaker of the poem appears to do, that there once were helpful gods who have only now abandoned us. The truth is, as Christ found, that God never cared. Mason does not know what purpose God could possibly have in mind in treating us so badly. There is a close link between Mason and Christ, while the divinity is distant and hostile.

The insistence that Christ is in no special sense the son of God, but merely a man – though one of significance – leads the poet to present Christ to us in highly unorthodox fashion. For if Christ is our fellow, then it also becomes possible to see Christ in our fellows. This way we can explain why Herostratus, for example, is so much like Christ. "Herostratus at Ephesus" is prefaced by a brief statement from Quintus Curtius to the effect that Herostratus burned down the temple of Diana for no other reason than that he wanted to immortalise himself. The action may strike us as barbarous and silly. That is not, however, Mason's point. Rather, the poem is about the nature of immortality. The speaker of the poem, using such language as we associate with Christ, asserts that, though others spit at him, "mine is still the crown [...] still deathless fame my lot" and "though you scorn me yet / this outcast reviled mocked and despised fool / alone inherits immortality" (Mason 1971: 39). If Christ is immortal, it is not because his soul is, any more than the populace tormenting him or Herostratus. The only thing that guarantees

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immortality is doing something which will make such an impact that others remember one as a result. Nor is it particularly difficult to achieve such remembrance. Where, presumably, there is a difference between Herostratus and Christ is that the actions of the latter are not destructive. But the painful fact remains that it is, in a sense, Christ's notoriety in the eyes of the populace which mocked him which has ensured his continued existence – in the minds of others, not as an immortal being.

Mason is fascinated with Christ as an outcast, as he is with outcasts generally. It would be possible to exaggerate the resemblance between Herostratus and Christ, but Mason does associate the two, and it is characteristic of him to see Christ in a beggar. Very probably Mason has Christ in mind even in one of the first poems in the volume, "The Beggar." The beggar is criticised by an insensitive and obtuse speaker, and the last stanza of the poem is particularly telling:

> Curse the beggar in the street
> curse the beggar that he die
> curse him for his shrivelled feet
> and his cruel sight-striving eye. (Mason 1971: 25)

In "Oil and Ointments," Christ has a "longing foot"; his feet "have bruised and bled along the lonely way" (Mason 1971: 46). In "On the Swag," Christ needs "slippers on his feet" (Mason 1971: 56). In "Arius Prays," Mason refers to the hard road that Christ's "clumsy feet once trod" (Mason 1971: 108). The beggar's "sight-striving [ie blind?] eye" is also paralleled in descriptions of Christ. For example, in "Wayfarers" Mason mentions that he has seen Christ break "the bondage of his tongue-tied sightlessness" (Mason 1971: 36). In "If the Drink," Christ is contrasted with "the happy-eyed" (Mason 1971: 53). In "Nails and a Cross," he can only see the blood beneath him if he squints (Mason 1971: 109).

A process of association is fundamental to the way Mason's creative imagination works, and even if the beggar does not remind us of Christ immediately, he certainly does so once we have read the whole book of poems attentively. Mason's point is that Christ is not the only sufferer. He is important as an example of suffering humanity, but so are others, and any beggar, for example, is a potential Christ. Thus the cook in "On the Swag" is wrong to curse the beggar in that poem. On the contrary, Mason asserts, the old cove needs to be treated well, "for this is Christ" (Mason 1971: 56). The poet's concern is not so much to raise the status of beggars in our eyes as to stress that Christ deserves good treatment from us as a fellow-sufferer, and that the same applies to any person like him. The emphasis of Mason's vision, therefore, is away from worship of God-the-Creator towards sympathy for Christ as suffering man, and all similar victims of both God's and society's cruelty.

The sense of brotherhood in Mason becomes a moral imperative, not just because brotherhood is a positive thing anyway, but especially because we can

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derive no comfort from a God who exists but is cruel. In this respect Mason's social vision is directly connected with his religious outlook, and the two should be considered together. The connection is obvious in, for example, "Sonnet of Brotherhood." People under siege "in a little fort," the poet argues, are forced to be friends (Mason 1971: 35). They might under different circumstances "quarrel and divide," but a common threat imposes a degree of unity on them:

> 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. (Mason 1971: 35)

The "far-pitched perilous hostile place" is sometimes thought of as New Zealand. Mason's poems do reveal his sense of loneliness there, of being a victim among Pharisees, but it is not necessary to see the phrase as applying to anything less than the common human condition. His point is that, in view of "Fate's gigantic plot" against us, we must seek solace in our common humanity. The use of the word "Fate" is interesting. It suggests to me that once again Mason acknowledges the existence of a higher power, but is not prepared to see it as something positive. It is, on the contrary, actively malignant in leaving us "betrayed." It is hard to believe that what the poet calls "Fate" here is actually something different from the hostile God to whom he refers elsewhere.

The figure of Christ is the main vehicle Mason employs to make us aware of our human condition, the suffering imposed on all of us by a divinity who kills us for sport, and the resulting need for us to love one another, and especially those among us whose suffering is painfully obvious. Our love may be misdirected, however, and appears to be so in "Tribute." This beautiful little poem conveys the enthusiasm of someone who, although "but weak and poor" himself, felt the need to treat Christ well in what turns out to be too material a way (Mason 1971: 37). In his wish to make Christ stay instead of passing his door, the speaker lit his every torch "though it was all brightest day" (Mason 1971: 37). The result of his extravagance is that he spilled all his wine and wasted all his unguents. The implication seems to be that Christ either stays anyway or moves on offended; in either case, the speaker's error is that he thought that Christ needs such things as torches, wine and unguents, while all that is called for is the speaker's love, as Christ in his turn loves this man despite, or because of, his poverty.

This is not to say, however, that Mason is so hidebound that he regards the speaker's urge as sinful. But presumably this speaker does not have quite enough awareness of Christ's mental condition as distinct from his visible poverty, in contrast with the speaker in "Oils and Ointments," who shows intense sensitivity to the pain which Christ has endured. This speaker intends to shower just such gifts on Christ as the one in "Tribute," but his sense of identification with Christ's

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suffering is closer. He urges Christ to stretch out his "soothful longing foot," and thus demonstrates his instinctively accurate sense of what Christ feels (Mason 1971: 46). Resembling Christ, he knows what it is like to soothe someone else's pain as well as to experience it. The relationship is one of full reciprocity at the deepest human level.

The capacity for a sense of common humanity lives among all of us, although we may be only dimly aware of the fact. The protagonist of "Old Memories of Earth" believes his home to be purely earthly, and contrasts himself with those who claim they remember lands of bliss where they communed with gods. But to reject God, Mason implies, does not mean rejecting Christ at the same time, and the speaker of the poem is no doubt wrong in leading a life in which Christ plays no part. In fact, although he does not know it, Christ seeks him out when he walks all alone: "to me there came a fellow I have known / in some old times, but when I cannot say" (Mason 1971: 28). As this meeting occurs near "One Tree Hill," Mason's allusion to Christ is obvious enough, although the speaker knows nothing other than that "we must have been great friends, I and he" (Mason 1971: 28). Still, although his memory is exceedingly vague, the fact remains that the speaker's sense of identification with Christ is strong enough for him to have a glimpse of their former friendship: "otherwise I should not remember him" (Mason 1971: 28).

Likely enough, the speaker of "The Vigil" is similarly plagued by a defective memory. During the night, this speaker lay awake, "longing for some god to pray [to]" (Mason 1971: 29). He heard sinister noises, like the tolling of bells, a cry "such as men give when they die," and the digging of a grave (Mason 1971: 29). None of this stirs him to remember anything until "Morning came and the cock crew / clearly, shrilly, and I knew" (Mason 1971: 29). What the speaker "knew," of course, is that he had betrayed Christ. But that treachery is not a matter of active ill will. Rather, he has shown himself forgetful. While lying awake, he did not realise that what happened should concern him, that the night's events should have led him to feel a sense of shared humanity. Only when the cock crows is his memory jolted, and he becomes aware that the dead person, whoever else he was, was in one sense Christ, a sufferer who needed compassion rather than the distant interest of someone more preoccupied with his own well-being or his longing to pray to a God presumably not deserving of such respect. Then again, though these people have some difficulty knowing their allegiance to Christ-figures, they are quite different from those who are positively malicious, like the speaker of "The Beggar," who mistakenly exclaims:

> Curse the beggar in the street
> that he has less joy than I
> as at these fine old trees' feet
> body-satisfied I lie. (Mason 1971: 25)

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The joy of this person resembles that of the protagonist of "Judas Iscariot" (Mason 1971: 57). Lack of compassion for people like Christ is in Mason's view invariably shown by, for one thing, merriment, laughter at the tragedy either caused by the villains in Mason's world, or at the least something openly and consciously tolerated and encouraged by them.

Ultimately, however, our tendency to betray our fellow-sufferers is harmful not only to those Christ-like people, but also to ourselves. "Judas Iscariot" shows its contempt for this traitor by the irony of its language, undercutting the seeming praise of Judas as, for example, "the most sporting bird." Not so in "The Leave-Taking," which describes how a group of people buried their friend "with never a word / as he had wailed / to be interred" (Mason 1971: 74). Part of the blame here seems to lie with the dead man, who would have done more good if he had encouraged the survivors to give vent to their grief. But eventually their fellow-feeling comes to the fore; they are all as dead

> Till 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." (Mason 1971: 74)

This person, I take it, has for too long tried to deny that his fellow was a good man. Although this is not the product of bad will, as in Judas's case, this "lover" has made the mistake of hiding his love from himself. Hence, when he breaks into a moan he can only do so with an "ancient" voice that during his day-to-day existence he no longer owns. Yet undoubtedly he, and all the members of his group, benefit from their renewed awareness of love:

> At the cry of him tortured
> their poor faces leapt
> into life once again
> and they wept. (Mason 1971: 74)

Religion in R.A.K. Mason's poems is not of a conventional nature, but I think it is firmly within the tradition of English Romanticism. Mason feels intensely dissatisfied with the world as created by a God whom he views as hostile, and with hostility. Neither does he accept the conduct of most human beings, but as an idealist, he comes to replace traditional worship of God with a love of fellow-sufferers which he thinks we can potentially all, or almost all, share. He uses the Christian myth in order to rewrite it. Like Blake and Shelley he expresses distaste for God-the-Father, and makes Christ the example of what he values in humanity. Through his portrayal of Christ, he wishes to make us aware above all of the need for love of our fellows, and especially the most helpless ones among them. Nor is

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there anything in Mason's poems, I feel, which is not quite readily accessible to those who do not know New Zealand. In the present essay I have, in fact, highlighted what seems to me the universal significance of what he has to say. There is little point, I feel, in approaching his verse as though it specifically embodies a New Zealand situation. I don't think that Mason himself wished his poems to be read in that fashion. On the contrary, he typically emphasised the universality of things. His presentation, again and again, of a Christ abandoned by both God and other people, served this purpose well. His poetry continues to speak quite readily to all who have a knowledge of the basics of Christ's story as found in the Bible, and who are prepared to entertain the possibility that the poet's interpretation of that story, however idiosyncratic, reveals to us important truths about our condition.

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