

Baling the Golden Fleece: Baxter's Jason¹

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An essay on James K. Baxter's treatment of the Greek hero Jason might seem likely to be as brief as Dr Johnson's famous chapter on 'the snakes of Iceland', which read in its entirety 'There are no snakes to be met with throughout the whole island.' The name of Jason never appears in John Weir's edition of Baxter's *Collected Poems*. There are only two passing allusions to episodes in the Jason saga, both in very early poems: to the Sown Men who 'sprang sprightly' from dragon's teeth in 'To M.A.B.' (1943; *CP* 18), and to the 'Symplegades' or Clashing Rocks in 'Letter to Noel Ginn' (1944; *CP* 29).²

However, when one looks at the unpublished or uncollected poems in Baxter's manuscript notebooks (which outnumber those in the *Collected Poems* by a ratio of 3:1), the Jason story emerges as a significant underground presence. In several poems in the 1950s Jason's relationship with his two objects of desire, Medea and the Golden Fleece, becomes strangely associated with Baxter's own troubled marriage. And, most interestingly, in the early 1960s, Jason and the Fleece appear in a series of versions of a poem in which Baxter attempts to deal with the influence of his friend, mentor, and rival Denis Glover and his formative year in Christchurch in 1948. Jason is clearly not one of the most important of Baxter's mythological figures, but he is worth a detour.³

In 'Notes on the Education of A New Zealand Poet' Baxter recalls how as a child he 'became the companion of Odin and Thor and Jason and Ulysses' (*MH* 132). The story of the quest of Jason and the Argonauts for the Golden Fleece is indeed one of the greatest of boys' adventure stories. From an adult point of view, Jason may not

¹ I am deeply grateful to Mrs J. C. Baxter and the Baxter Estate for permission to consult and quote from Baxter's unpublished notebooks and letters, and to Professor Vincent O'Sullivan for permission to quote material in the McKay papers. My thanks to the librarians of the Hocken Library and the Beaglehole Room for their assistance with research; and to Paul Millar and John Davidson for very helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

² The Sown Men motif also occurs in the story of Cadmus, but Baxter never refers to Cadmus, and it seems much more probable that he had the Jason saga in mind here.

³ A much broader survey of Baxter's uses of classical mythology will appear in a forthcoming book by John Davidson, Geoffrey Miles, and Paul Millar, provisionally entitled *No Myth Is Ever False: James K. Baxter and the Centrality of Classical Myth*.

appear the most impressive or admirable of the heroes of Greek mythology. On the voyage to Colchis in quest of the Fleece he was accompanied and aided by an entire crew of other heroes, and he gained the Fleece only by the aid of the witch-princess Medea, who fell in love with him; then, on returning to Greece, he tried to abandon her for another woman, prompting her to an appalling revenge. In Apollonios's *Argonautika*, the Hellenistic epic of which he is the nominal hero, he is a handsome but weak and irresolute leader; in Euripides' tragedy *Medea* he is positively contemptible.

This would not necessarily make him less interesting to Baxter, whose view of the Greek heroes is seldom simply celebratory. As a pacifist and near-anarchist, he has little interest in heroic warriors or heroic kings; as a Catholic pessimist obsessed with the Fall, he is disinclined to celebrate heroic human achievement. For him the Greek heroes tend to be (in a view perhaps not too far distant from that of the Greeks themselves) figures of human aspiration and failure, pursuing happiness in a fallen world. Even Odysseus, Baxter's most consistent alter ego and role-model, is seen for the most part as a tragic figure. Jason easily falls into this pattern. Neither as admirable as Baxter's Christ-like Hercules/Herakles, nor as despicable as his worldly and ruthless Theseus, Jason is a flawed hero whose reckless adventuring leads him ultimately to failure and misery.

Jason first appears very early in Baxter's career, in a Petrarchan sonnet written at the age of seventeen. 'I, Jason' (1943; Hocken MS-704/10.627) lies heavily under the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a generally disastrous model for the young poet; nevertheless, through its contorted syntax, pseudo-archaic diction, and overwrought tone, Baxter's vision of Jason comes through clearly enough. The old hero is looking back on his life:

I Jason in ice-flower anointed, grown
 Prometheus' fettered wounds in fester from
 May brute bulls wrestle, or—corn furrow-flame
 Keel-carving, armour clean from sod—the sown
 Children-of-war me menaced by; but breast-bone,
 Held helot-heart like hail makes river-room
 Mid hilled and crag-iron creeds; wit is the groom,
 Handman to ill ends bent—chance broke—and serf sad-shown.
 Oh, age more brave than bull or battle will
 Chasten; ill-made, heart-mauled, in racking dire
 I'll curse sure-fruits of God-forgetting, spill

Remorse to acid-eat; but O in hell-gyre
 Creusa, created pure (drake-seed) is shrill
 I'the anguish-pyre, death-robe. O deeper-dark the fire!

In the octave Jason recalls how he won the Golden Fleece with the help of Medea's sorcery, which enabled him to tame the fire-breathing oxen and defeat the warriors who spring up from the sown dragon's teeth. He derived his temporary invulnerability from the potion with which Medea anointed him. In a detail taken from Apollonios's *Argonautika* (3. 846), the potion was 'the Promethean charm', distilled from the flower which grew from the blood of the tormented Prometheus as it fell on the icy crags of Caucasus (geographically close to Medea's homeland on the Black Sea). By picking up and emphasising this detail, Baxter links Jason to one of the most important mythological 'figures of self' in his adolescent poetry: Prometheus, an image of the artist who suffers for his attempt to bring truth to humanity. In his essay 'The Unicorn: a consideration of adolescence' Baxter describes him as 'the Titan Prometheus, from whose wound grows the iceflower of art' (*Spark* 536). The symbolism of Jason being anointed with this 'ice-flower' is rather cryptic; it is hard to see him, here or elsewhere, as a figure of the artist. He is, however, depending on the magical 'art' (and the deceptive cunning and artfulness) of Medea. His use of the Promethean charm could thus be read as a perversion of the creative power represented by Prometheus to selfish and manipulative ends. It is the same kind of perversion that in Baxter's later work comes to taint Prometheus himself, who strikingly degenerates from an artist-martyr into a symbol of soulless technology and propagandist 'art' (see e.g. 'The Criticism of Poetry', *JKBCritic* 26).

Certainly in the second quatrain Jason condemns himself as a dishonourable coward—a 'helot', a 'serf'—for relying on cunning ('wit') rather than heroic battle to achieve his quest. In the sestet he bitterly reflects how this youthful sin of 'God-forgetting' has been punished in his old age. The same sorcery of Medea's that he once used to gain the Fleece has now caused the death of his new bride Creusa, horribly burned to death by a poisoned bridal robe, while he suffers the equal burning of corrosive remorse.⁴ Jason emerges as a tragically flawed hero,

⁴ The reference to Creusa as 'drake-seed'—presumably 'offspring of dragons'?—is deeply obscure. Baxter may have been confusing the royal house of Corinth with that of Thebes (the family of Oedipus), which was partly descended from the 'Sown Men' created by Cadmus out of dragons' teeth.

condemned and punished not (as in Euripides' tragedy) for his treacherous betrayal of Medea, but for his embrace of her and what she represents.

Medea again appears in an unsympathetic light—and again in mysterious association with Prometheus and the ice-flower—in a passage in the long poem 'For those who lie with crooked limbs in the straight grave' (1944; *Spark* 368-70):

Medea rides

The black and marble midnight: twin dragons
 Before her chariot flaming; from cloudy Caucasus
 Where chained Prometheus bleeds: on burning snow
 Blows the cold ice-flower.

Young Absyrtus dead

In the blue seaway, drowned and floating head:
 With him the Spring rots livid, unfulfilled.

Like many of Baxter's early poems, this one is built around the seasonal opposition between winter and spring, cold and warmth. Medea is an inhabitant of the 'winter world' of psychological despair, social alienation, and war. As Baxter explained to Noel Ginn (letter 16 July 1944; *Spark* 366), she is 'a symbol of that which survives by craft and coldness'. He here conflates two episodes from her story: the murder of her brother Absyrtus during the escape of the *Argo* from Colchis (she dismembered his body and threw the fragments overboard to delay her father's pursuit), and her flight in a dragon-drawn chariot from Corinth after vengefully killing her own children by Jason. Drawing the two murders together, Baxter underlines Medea's mythic status as child-killer. In killing Absyrtus, identified with spring, she symbolically destroys the world's hope of renewal and regeneration in order to ensure her own survival. The implicit reference, in this 1944 poem, is to the carnage of the War ('Algae upon the sunken submarine; / And the dull jolting of a corpse encaverned'), with Medea suggesting the politicians prepared to sacrifice a generation of young men in order to prop up a corrupt and moribund world order.

It is something of a jolt to turn from the murky grandeur of these early poems to the next appearance of Jason and Medea in the 1950s; yet there is an underlying thematic continuity. In 'Husband and Wife' (1956; Hocken MS-704/18.45) a modern-day Jason addresses his wife, in a tone that abruptly, comically descends from the high Romantic to the jingling complacencies of suburbia:

My sweet Medea, let us sing
 Below the dragon-guarded star:
 We have two kids, hey-ding-a-ding,
 A flat, a fridge, a motor car.

Our regime, rational, humane,
 Ignores the savage's caprice;
 But oh in dreams I sail again
 And labour for the Golden Fleece.

With an oar-roughened hand I grip
 Your playground of official sex;
 Then to the chest-of-drawers I trip
 For diaphragm and Koromex.

This Jason and Medea have tamed the fire of sexual passion and made it cool, tidy, predictable, and risk-free, thanks to modern techniques of birth control (Koromex is a contraceptive gel); the efficient liquidation of Jason's sperm is described in up-to-the-minute technological metaphors of space flight and aerial bombing. Nevertheless Jason cherishes wistful memories of more erotic past encounters ('Yet I recall when out of sleep / Your breasts flowed like the Milky Way'), and he watches with a mixture of pride and regret as their children, once 'wild', become 'day by day / More contraceptively polite':

Sometimes I want to yell and grunt
 And like an apeman hug them tight.

But you, my mild Medea, with
 A lucid No would stop the dance.
 You lead me from the sexual myth
 To a platonic tolerance.

On one level the satire is against modern rational, scientific habits of thought that ignore the significance of 'myth' as a mode of human experience. The poem's final phrase alludes to the second of Yeats's 'Two Songs from a Play' (Yeats 239-40):

Odour of blood when Christ was slain
 Made all platonic tolerance vain
 And vain all Doric discipline.

The suggestion is that Medea's cold and bloodless rationalism is intent on denying the 'odour of blood' which, in Yeats's poem, is essential to both the Dionysian and the Christian view of the world.⁵ Baxter's more pointed and savage satire, however, is on the practice of birth control. Baxter in 1956 was on the verge of conversion to Catholicism, and he here adopts (implicitly) the Catholic equation of contraception with murder. This Medea is in the same tradition as the Medea of 'For those who lie'; where the mythic Medea, with 'craft and coldness', killed her brother and her children to ensure her own survival, the modern bourgeois Medea kills her potential children to safeguard her comfortable lifestyle—'More kids would strain our bank account / And spoil your lovely figure, dear.' And, in bringing up her son and daughter to be 'contraceptively polite', she is crushing the life out of them as well.

In the following year Baxter revised the poem as 'Husband to Wife (Modern Version)' (1957; Hocken MS-704/19.46). The revised text has been verbally polished but not radically altered. The most interesting textual change is that while the husband is still associated with Jason, 'My dear Medea' has become 'My dearest Psyche'—a name illuminated by a passage in 'Theme for the Middle Years' (c.1955; Hocken MS-704/17.108):

She whom I hated worse than death,
The Psyche of suburban homes,
Beckons with arch, maternal breath
And lawns ornate with plaster gnomes.

However, Baxter has appended to the poem a satirical prose dialogue between 'Annie' and 'Fanny', who discuss the blessings of contraception ('the modern woman's ticket to freedom'), their determination to avoid 'that gruesome business of childbearing', and the selfishness of their sex-obsessed husbands, before concluding thankfully that 'at least they're not Catholic'; the playlet ends with an epiphany of the birth control pioneer Marie Stopes 'in her glory, childless, attended by bloody fetuses'. This angry squib (which Baxter has later heavily crossed out) clearly reflects tension on the issue within Baxter's own marriage, related to his

⁵ Compare Baxter's words in his 1971 interview with John Weir (Weir 244): 'I think that Catholic art—Christian art I'd rather say—at its best is wounded art. There is blood in it; you know, the wounds of the person are present in it. It's close to the Crucifixion. It's not Apollonian: it's more Dionysiac.' Incidentally, Baxter's memory may have been drawn to the Yeats poems by the reference to 'another Argo' in the first song.

temporary separation from Jacquie in October 1957 and his acceptance into the Catholic Church in January 1958 (McKay 157-59).

In the 'Husband to Wife' poems the Golden Fleece is used with mock-heroic irony as a sexual image; in the first it is identified with 'your playground of official sex', in the second with 'your fanny in its flannel gown'. But at the same time that he is writing these satirically disillusioned poems about marriage, Baxter is also using the image of the Golden Fleece in a much more positive way to express his love for Jacquie. In 'The Phoenix' Nest' (1957; Hocken MS-704/19.30), an elegiac poem about the fragility of love, the Fleece is associated with Jacquie's hair—what he calls in another poem 'My own woman's dark mane of hair' ('Spring', *CP* 404):

Who can find the phoenix' nest
 Or the basilisk in his lair?
 I have seen King Orion
 Fettered by a hair.

Let it hang below your shoulders,
 The gold Jason stole:
 A gaol to ease the body's pain,
 A cloister for my soul.⁶

The image reappears in 'To My Wife' (Hocken MS-704/19.91), a poem written in India in early January 1959 in praise of Jacquie and in celebration of the repair of their relationship.⁷ This time it is recalled only to be retracted:

Once I wrote of Jason's fleece
 Because your hair was long,
 But now I am a Catholic
 I sing a different song.

⁶ It is very characteristic of Baxter's contradictions that on the very next page after this lovely, tender lyric comes 'Coffeehouse Serenade' (MS-704/19.31), which recycles some of its key lines into a bawdy parody beginning 'Shrink not, my intellectual maid, / Impaled as yet by no rude phallus!'

⁷ In a letter from New Delhi dated 8 January 1959, Baxter quotes the poem which he wrote 'last night', and comments: 'I do believe that Jacquie and I have reached the rock, the magnetic mountain, after coming so near to shipwreck. [...] I, like a blind man who all but lost a great jewel, have thought at times that it was my job to irrigate Jacquie's deserts of unbelief; while she unconsciously has lived always in an area where love and humility are possible' (letter to Ethel Law, in Hocken Misc-MS-0682).

Declaring that ‘pagan songs and pagan hearts / In Hell’s deep marshes end,’ he sets aside the image of the Golden Fleece and develops instead a reverent comparison of Jacquie to ‘the Blessed Virgin’:

Like hers your thoughts are straight and pure,
 Like hers your touch is mild,
 As when you washed with your own hands
 The sores of the dhobi’s child.

Nevertheless, despite being placed ‘under erasure’, the pagan image remains as a palimpsest beneath the surface of this deeply Catholic poem, contributing to the sense of his wife’s both physical and spiritual beauty.

Baxter’s puritanical renunciation of ‘pagan’ imagery in ‘To My Wife’ is only momentary; more characteristic is the assertion that ‘No myth is ever false.’ That claim comes from the last of Baxter’s Jason poems, ‘The Fleece’. It is one of a series of versions of a poem which Baxter was working on in the early 1960s, looking back on his year in Christchurch in 1948, his early relationship with Denis Glover, and an epiphanic experience which he had while being driven through the Canterbury landscape. The unpublished versions are ‘A View from the Port Hills [I]’ (1961; Hocken MS-704/22.35); ‘A View from the Port Hills [II]’ (1962; Hocken MS-704/22.91); and ‘The Fleece’ (1962; Hocken MS-704/23.54).⁸ Only the first and third of these versions refer explicitly to Glover, or to Jason; in the second he is simply an anonymous ‘friend’. ‘Words for a Poet’ (CP 424), written in 1968 and posthumously published in *The Bone Chanter*, is a significantly different poem but reworks the central experience and image from the earlier versions. In this final version Glover, and Jason, have once again disappeared from the poem; the addressee is an anonymous ‘brother’ poet, described as now ‘dead by drink’.

The year 1948 was a momentous one for Baxter. He was living for the first time in a city other than Dunedin, hobnobbing with writers and artists—Glover, Allen Curnow, Charles Brasch, Bill Pearson, and Colin McCahon—and received as ‘the “marvellous boy” of New Zealand poetry’ (McKay 103). He brought out his second volume of poems (after a four-year gap), *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness*, largely selected by Glover and published by the Caxton Press. He was undergoing Jungian psychoanalysis; he

⁸ See Appendix for the texts of these three poems. Dating is based on Weir’s dating in CP of the poems surrounding them in the notebooks.

was courting Jacquie, and married her that December. At the same time he was living in squalid conditions, drinking heavily, and at times contemplating suicide; he was, as he later put it in 'Christchurch 1948' (1960; *CP* 215-16), 'under the sign of Dionysus-Hades', the compound god of alcohol, madness, poetic inspiration, death and the underworld. His friendship with Glover was one of the most important ones formed in that year, lubricated by their common taste for hard drinking and their shared belief 'that alcohol unlocked the sources of poetry' (Ogilvie 308). Glover, who liked to recall that 'Denis' was derived from 'Dionysus' (interview with Frank McKay), fully sympathised with Baxter's theory in this matter while complaining that he carried it to extremes in practice. Glover later summed up his feelings towards Baxter at that time as 'a mixture of real love and great misgiving, tinged with utter dislike' (McKay 104). Over the years, especially after Baxter's conversion to Catholicism, the misgivings and dislike came to predominate (Ogilvie 402; *Memorial Volume* 125). Baxter was less forthcoming about his feelings towards Glover, but the Jason poems hint at their complexity in the 1960s.

Baxter first jokingly assigned Glover the name 'Jason' in his bawdy round-up of New Zealand writers, 'The Boathouse by the Sea' (1960; *NSP* 195-7):

There was Uncle Jason Glover with a bucket full of gin,
Too shallow for a bath but deep enough to paddle in,
Eating all the saveloys and blowing up the skin
With a fol de rol de roly O.

Jason was an obviously appropriate image for Glover with his naval background and buccaneering air, and may go back as a nickname or private joke to their first acquaintance. It is also possible, though, that Baxter's use of it in the 1960s poems was inspired by Glover's poem 'The Old Jason, the Argonaut' (Glover 74-5), published in *Since Then* in 1957.

'The Old Jason, the Argonaut' adopts the persona of the old hero looking back over his life, like Baxter's early 'I, Jason', though in a very different tone and idiom. Its tone is more comparable, in fact, to Baxter's contemporary poems about the old Odysseus on Ithaca.⁹ Glover seems to identify with Jason in much the same way

⁹ See, e.g., 'Green Figs at Table'; (1957; *CP* 183), 'The Tempter' (1959-60; *CP* 205). The most closely comparable poems are unpublished, e.g. 'Odysseus' ('Coming into the middle years...', 1957; Hocken MS-704/19.22) or 'The Old Age of Odysseus' (1958-59; Hocken MS-704/19.89). I discuss

that Baxter, repeatedly, identified with Odysseus. The poem's rather clumsy-sounding title could be read as deliberately obtruding the incongruity between the once young Argonaut and the unhappy old man he now is:

I sit beside my old ship, the timbers rotting,
Some damned old woman with her entrails telling
How Argo's hull will fall upon my head
For expiation of those expeditious deaths.

Like Baxter in the Odysseus poems, Glover suggests an inherent tension and conflict between the adventuring male and the home-bound and home-binding female, here personified in the 'damned old woman' who prophesies the hero's ignominious death—accurately, as we know from the legend (Euripides, *Medea* 1386-88). This poem's attitude to Medea, nevertheless, is not the simple condemnation that Baxter directed at his 'symbol of [...] craft and coldness'. Glover's Jason, clearly still partly in love, struggles to define his view of her contradictions in paradox and oxymoron: 'her warm, cold calculating front', 'that dark, treacherously loyal breast'. He passes over his own betrayal of Medea with a laconic 'I played the fool.' At the centre of the poem is Jason's question, 'Was the Fleece worth it, and the Medea [...]?', and his defiant response:

Yes, but it was, though labours brought
Nothing but glory and the name of Argonaut.

The emphasis on 'glory' clearly defines Glover's difference from Baxter, who hardly ever uses the word and then almost exclusively in religious contexts. Despite the pathos of the poem's beginning and end, Glover ultimately presents Jason's tale of adventure and sexual passion as a heroic one, splendidly 'worth it' for all its catastrophic ending.

In the Christchurch poems Baxter imbues Glover himself with the same kind of heroic glamour. In the opening section of each version he sets the wild Bacchanalian behaviour in which he indulged in Glover's company against the literal flatness and greyness of 1940s Christchurch. In this context come the images of Glover as Jason:

some of these poems in 'Three Calypsos: Baxter's Variations on a Mythic Theme' in *Still Shines When You Think Of It*, ed. Bill Manhire and Peter Whiteford (234-48).

You were the Jason of our times,
The one who had the courage of his crimes;

You taught me how to think.

(‘A View from the Port Hills [I]’)

You seemed
The impossible Jason I had dreamed
About: a man who’d grabbed and baled the Golden Fleece

Simply by being tough.

(‘The Fleece’)

In that spiritual wasteland where ‘The grey / Light kills us’, Glover was a rebellious hero,¹⁰ fusing intellect and ‘tough’ action, capable of seizing the Golden Fleece of happiness.

The glamour is qualified, however. Baxter hints at the rueful self-criticism of a recovering alcoholic recalling his youthful excesses: where in ‘A View [I]’ he comments derisively that the founders of Christchurch ‘must have been drunk’, in ‘A View [II]’ he adds a wry acknowledgement that he is in no position to criticise—‘Like me then.’ There are hints too of the tension which, as we know from Glover’s recollections, existed between the two poets. ‘The Fleece’ refers to ‘a difficult peace’ between them. The manuscript of that poem has an amusing and revealing correction: where Baxter first wrote that when he smashed Glover’s lightshade with his sword ‘You didn’t grumble,’ he subsequently inserts between the lines a further word—‘much’. The correction is borne out by Glover’s own later, more lurid—and one suspects somewhat embroidered—account of the episode.¹¹ More seriously, the phrase ‘the courage of his *crimes*’ in ‘A View [I]’ resonates uneasily with Baxter’s earlier portrayal of the hero in ‘I, Jason’ as morally compromised and guilt-racked;

¹⁰ Another mythological allusion in ‘A View [I]’, ‘That year we piled / Pelion on Ossa,’ associates Baxter and Glover with the rebel Giants who stacked one mountain on top of another in an attempt to storm Olympus. The image suggests hyperbolic excess but also rebellion against authority and the status quo.

¹¹ Interviewed by Frank McKay in 1979, Glover recalled: ‘Now this time he was engaged to dear Jacquie plighted his troth to her the most beautiful girl you ever saw in your life. But with a few drinks, I had a great cavalry sword which I’d bought second hand and he took this whipped it out of its scabbard and he was going to decapitate this poor girl of 18 without any general doubt until I disarmed him. [...] poor Jacquie was terrified but there it is’ (McKay Papers 1/25, p. 5; spelling silently corrected).

and in 'The Fleece' significant question-marks are placed around Glover's heroic status: 'You *seemed* / The *impossible* Jason.' Is grabbing and baling the Golden Fleece really an admirable approach to life? Is it even possible, or just a youthful, drink-hazed illusion?

The macho world of the first half of each poem, a world of poet-adventurers and intellectual swashbucklers flourishing phallic swords and pissing in pub carparks, is then contrasted in the second half with a feminised Canterbury landscape: 'Land of drenched willows, riverflats and farms'. (This key line appears in all four versions.) Moist and fertile, this landscape is conceived in strongly maternal terms. In 'A View from the Port Hills' (both versions) Baxter says that the landscape 'Carried me in her placket like a child / Unborn.'¹² In 'A View [I]', where the land is 'crude', the emphasis is on his own immaturity: innocent as an unborn child, he awaited teaching and shaping by the father-figure Glover into the self-reliance of a Man Alone:

I understood
Nothing; learnt three words at the Heathcote Arms
From you—*Truth is ourselves.*

'A View [II]', strikingly different, puts the emphasis of the poem's final words on his youthful dream of peaceful harmony with nature: 'I dreamt the wild / Green earth could hold us lifelong in her arms.' 'The Fleece' develops this into a more powerful moment of epiphany:

One winter Sunday with
You and Mary in the Austin, I,
Squeezed by hangover, found the Fleece Itself,
Through the green polled
Land of drenched willows, riverflats and farms,
Carried and cradled
In strong invisible arms.

The syntax is ambiguous: is it the poet or the Fleece that is 'carried and cradled'? But it is clear that the poet has experienced a 'golden' moment of pure happiness and peace in the protective presence of nature. In 'Words for a Poet' Baxter and his

¹² The word *placket* originally meant a woman's apron or underskirt, or a slit or pocket therein; it then naturally become a slang synonym for 'vagina' (OED). Baxter's line thus fuses the images of being carried (domestically) in the pocket of a mother's apron or in the womb itself.

friend share the same sense of ‘understanding’, a revelation of meaning and harmony in the everyday objects they see, as they ride together

in the small Austin
Through the green fabled

Land of drenched willows, river-flats and farms,
All of us acknowledge as the matrix

Of whatever grows in us.

Matrix here clearly evokes the original Latin sense of ‘womb’, as it does in the famous ‘Poem in the Matukituki Valley’ (*CP* 86-87): ‘For us the land is matrix and destroyer.’

Throughout the poem’s metamorphoses runs a tension between two conceptions of worldly happiness. Is the Golden Fleece something to be actively pursued, ‘grabbed and baled’, by the toughness and wit of a hero like Jason? Or is it something in which one may be more passively ‘carried and cradled’, in the maternal and Edenic embrace of the natural world? Very characteristically, Baxter suggests that neither answer is satisfactory. All four poems end, explicitly or implicitly, with a sense of failure and disillusionment. Heroic worldly ambitions come to nothing: ‘A View [I]’ ends with ‘So much attempted and so little done’, ‘The Fleece’ with a sour metaphor of the poets’ ‘talented destiny, / To clink in the world’s pocket till we die, / Then to be lifted and labelled to blaze in rows on the upper shelf.’¹³ The embrace of Nature, equally, is shadowed by doubt in ‘A View [II]’—‘I *dreamt* the wild / Green earth could hold us lifelong in her arms’¹⁴—and bitterly repudiated in ‘Words to a Poet’: ‘Old nurse, foul nurse, / Why do you kill your children?’ Baxter longs for a Wordsworthian faith that ‘Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her’ (‘Tintern Abbey’, ll. 122-3), but knows that ‘because all men die, she can only comfort, never save’, and the only final happiness is found beyond this world (‘Conversation with an Ancestor’, *MH* 25-26).

¹³ The last stanza of ‘The Fleece’ is exceptionally hard to read, and ‘rows’ is a best guess. Presumably ‘talented’ led through the *talent* as an ancient measure of currency, and the Biblical parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), to the image of poets as coins, pocketed or displayed.

¹⁴ The implication was made more explicit in a series of phrases which Baxter successively added and deleted in the manuscript: ‘Foolishly’, ‘Young and wild’, ‘Like a fool’.

Baxter, it seems, never quite brought the Christchurch poem into focus, or decided exactly what it was to say to or about Denis Glover. Glover keeps disappearing and reappearing through successive versions before finally being written out in favour of the anonymous, dead poet-friend of 'Words to a Poet'—unless one takes 'dead by drink' as Baxter's covert judgement of what had happened to Glover, or to their friendship. In none of the versions is this a wholly successful poem, but it provides a fascinating glimpse of Baxter wrestling with fundamental issues, and of his use of classical myth—since 'No myth is ever false'—as a way of gaining insight into them.

Appendix: the unpublished Christchurch poems

A View from the Port Hills [I]

(MS-704.22.35)

Denis, the town's as flat as a drawing-board;
 The remittance men who built it on a bog
 Must have been drunk! At Sumner one wet day
 I smashed the lightshade with your Navy sword,
 And piddled like a dog
 On a tree outside the Valley Inn. The grey
 Light kills us. You were the Jason of our times,
 The one who had the courage of his crimes;

You taught me how to think. That year we piled
 Pelion on Ossa. In '48 this crude
 Land of drenched willows, riverflats and farms,
 Carried me in her placket like a child
 Unborn. I understood
 Nothing; learnt three words at the Heathcote Arms
 From you—*Truth is ourselves*—I oil my gun,
 So much attempted and so little done.

A View from the Port Hills [II]

(MS-704/22.91)

The town's as flat as a drawing-board;

The remittance men who built it on a bog
 Must have been drunk! Like me then. I smashed
 My friends' lightshade with a Navy sword
 And piddled like a dog
 On a tree outside the Valley Inn. Unfleshed
 I come back. In '48 this broad
 Land of drenched willows, riverflats and farms,
 Carried me in her placket like a child
 Unborn.

I dreamt the wild
 Green earth could hold us lifelong in her arms.

The Fleece
(for Denis Glover)

(MS-704/23.54)

Denis, the town was flat
 As the week-end beer you kept in that
 Giant glass flagon! At Sumner one wet day
 I smashed the lightshade with your Navy sword;
 You didn't grumble much. A difficult peace
 Kept us drinking till the grey
 Light broke. You gave me bed and board
 A hundred times. You seemed
 The impossible Jason I had dreamed
 About: a man who'd grabbed and baled the Golden Fleece

Simply by being tough. No myth
 Is ever false. One winter Sunday with
 You and Mary in the Austin, I,
 Squeezed by hangover, found the Fleece itself,
 Through the green polled
 Land of drenched willows, riverflats and farms,
 Carried and cradled
 In strong invisible arms.

Did you or I or neither see
 Our talented destiny,
 To clink in the world's pocket till we die,
 Then to be lifted and labelled to blaze in rows on the upper shelf?

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