

Some Liturgical Implications of the Thought of David Jones

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One of the most significant events in the life of the poet and artist David Jones (1895–1974) was his first glimpse of a Roman Catholic Mass. He was, at the time, a private soldier in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, serving near the front line during the first world war. Foraging for firewood, he had come across a ruined outhouse and, peering through a chink in the wall, he saw – as he put it in a letter written near the end of his life – “not the dim emptiness I had expected but the back of a sacerdos in a gilt-hued *Planeta* . . . two points of flickering light . . . white altar cloths and the white linen of the celebrant’s alb and amice and maniple . . .”. The scene, he went on, made

a big impression on me. For one thing I was astonished how close to the Front Line the priest had decided to make the Oblation and I was also impressed to see Old Sweat Mulligan, a somewhat fearsome figure, a real pugilistic, hard-drinking Goidelic Celt, kneeling there in the smoky candle-light. And one strong impression I had . . . I felt immediately the oneness between the Offerant and those toughs that clustered round him in the dim-lit byre – a thing I had never felt remotely as a Protestant at the Office of Holy Communion in spite of the insistence of Protestant theology on the ‘priesthood of the laity’.¹

Jones went on to become a Roman Catholic, and to become, too, a sort of amateur theologian, whose letters to the press, essays and reviews often contained a theological theme. When some of these were collected together, in a volume entitled *Epoch and Artist*², its editor, Harman Grisewood, chose to put on the title page an unattributed quotation: “He placed himself in the order of signs.” It was an entirely appropriate quotation, for this was precisely what Jones had done throughout his adult life, both as artist-poet and as Christian. In Jones’ view, it was the sign-making nature of the human

¹ David Jones, Letter to René Hague, 9–15 July 1973, reprinted in René Hague, ed., *Dai Greatcoat: A Self-Portrait of David Jones in his Letters* (London, Faber and Faber, 1980) p. 249.

² Harman Grisewood, ed., *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings by David Jones* (London, Faber and Faber, 1959.)

condition that made possible both human creativity and the sacramental understanding that was central to his faith.

The quotation chosen by Grisewood was not, however, one that had originally referred to any artist or poet in the usual sense. It was in fact from the work of the theologian, Maurice de la Taille, and it referred to Christ himself.³ What de la Taille had meant when he talked about “the order of signs” – in relation to the intrinsic link between the last supper, the cross, and the anamnesis of the eucharist – became a central aspect of Jones’ understanding. For, as Jones noted in his essay, *Art and Sacrament*, de la Taille’s thinking had “shed a sort of reflected radiance on the sign world in general.”⁴

Jones felt, however, that on its own this theological perspective was insufficient. It required expansion, he believed, in terms of what seemed to him a prior question that was “anthropological rather than . . . theological” – that of why “men *make sacraments*”.⁵ The answer, he went on to suggest, lies in the fact that signs, rites, commemorative acts and the like are used by man, not only because it is “natural to him,” but more specifically – and this is central to Jones’ whole thesis – because it is “natural to him by virtue of his being an artist”.⁶

Jones then went on to recall how, soon after leaving the army, he took up again the formal training as an artist that he had begun before the war, and pondered questions about art and about the eucharist. “The question of analogy” he recalled, “seemed not to occur until certain Post-Impressionist theories began to balk larger in our student conversation. Then, with relative suddenness, the analogy between what we call ‘the Arts’ and the things that Christians called the eucharistic signs became . . . apparent. It became increasingly apparent that this analogy applied to the whole gamut of ‘making’.”⁷

In particular, Jones went on, there was something implicit in the post-impressionist theories then current “which opened the eyes of us to what, many years back, I had the occasion to describe as ‘the unity of all made things’. For one of the more rewarding notions implicit in the post-Impressionist idea was that a work [of art] is a ‘thing’ and not (necessarily) the impression of some other thing. For example, that it is the ‘abstract’ quality in a painting (no matter how ‘realistic’) that causes that painting to have ‘being’, and which alone gives it the right to be claimed an art-work, as a making, as *poiesis*.”⁸

This insight on its own was not, however, sufficient for Jones. Although, he said, “the post-Impressionist theories indicated an

³ Maurice de la Taille, *The Mystery of Faith and Human Opinion Contrasted and Defined*, tr. J. B. Schimpf (London, Sheed and Ward, 1930) p. 212.

⁴ Jones, “Art and Sacrament” in *Epoch and Artist* p. 163, footnote.

⁵ Ibid. p. 163.

⁶ Ibid. p. 165.

⁷ Ibid. p. 171.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 171–2.

approach that was most salutary, they also provided ammunition for an unrewarding and somewhat unreal battle... the war of theories concerning 'abstract art' and 'representational art'. It was necessary, he went on, to assert "as axiomatic that all art is 'abstract' and all art 're-presents'".⁹ The hyphen in that term *re-presents* was, for Jones, crucial. For although the "reality" conveyed in any work of art may be a complex one, the work itself, he said, is "a 'thing', an object contrived of various materials and so ordered... as to show forth, recall and re-present [that reality], strictly within the conditions of a given art and under another mode... It is a *signum* of that reality and makes a kind of anamnesis of that reality."¹⁰ Thus, for Jones, if the anamnesis of the eucharist is instrumental in making Christ really present in the sacrament of the eucharist, the reality conveyed by a work of art becomes truly present to the beholder – if not "in the particular sense used by the theologians" then at least "in a certain analogous sense."¹¹

For Jones, it was not only "works of art" in the narrow sense that should be understood in this way. He had a belief very similar to that manifested in Ananda Coomaraswamy's dictum that an artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist. (This was a saying that Jones had no doubt heard often from the lips of Eric Gill, who was a strong early influence on him.) Things as diverse as "strategy, a birthday cake, a religious rite and a well known picture" were all things that for Jones bore witness "to the nature of the thing we call art and the nature of the creature we call man and the inseparability of the one from the other." The activity of art he went on, "far from being a branch activity, is trunical, and... the tree of man, root, bole, branches and foliage, is involved, of its nature, in that activity".¹² Only in this context, he felt, was it possible to make sense of the theological notion of sacrament, which would be "devoid of meaning unless the nature of man is sacramental..." Indeed, he asserted, "without *ars* there is no possibility of *sacramentum*."¹³

Jones stressed that the essay in which he made these comments arose primarily from his concerns as an artist and poet and that it could, as a result, constitute "nothing... beyond an enquiry."¹⁴ This is a statement that the student of liturgical and sacramental theology will inevitably endorse. For all its limitations, nevertheless, Jones' thinking in this area still constitutes an important enquiry, and not only because it prompts in us, as the Anglican writer A.M. Allchin has noted, an awareness of how "we fail to appreciate the nature of the specific sacraments of the Church... because we fail to appreciate

⁹ Ibid. p. 173.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 174.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. pp. 175–176.

¹³ Ibid. p. 176.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 177.

the way in which all things are sacramental, in particular all man's acts of making."¹⁵ Over and above this prompting, it is arguable that Jones' fundamental insight – that we are essentially sign-making beings – poses for us a number of specific questions that have remained without an adequate resolution.

Among these questions is that on which I wish to focus in the remainder of this essay: that of whether some of the liturgical reforms that occurred in the Roman Catholic church towards the end of Jones' life – the majority of which he reacted against strongly – were in fact as appropriate as was believed by those who imposed them. I refer here not so much to the change to the vernacular, against which Jones fulminated publicly and articulately. (In his own writing¹⁶ there had already occurred precisely the problem of conveying historical context in translation that he saw as a central issue in liturgical translation.¹⁷) I refer, rather, to the kinds of minor reform about which he fulminated privately and less articulately: those which involved either a significant change of symbolic emphasis – as in the change of the orientation of the priest during the Mass – or else a reduction of emphasis on “secondary” symbolism.

Perhaps because Jones' published comments on these issues are mostly taken from private letters rather than from documents intended for public debate, he can often, it must be admitted, sound like little more than a saloon bar reactionary when he refers to them. In the letter with which we began, for example, in which he recounted his first glimpse of the Mass, his mention of the manipule led him to fulminate about the way in which that item of the traditional eucharistic vestments had “been abandoned, without a word of explanation, by these blasted reformers”.¹⁸ We should, however, resist the temptation to dismiss such comments simply because of their tone. Jones was not simply a splenetic reactionary, for he could see clearly that some of those who shared his views were “rather like those cavalry officers of the 1st World War who were totally blind to the requirements of trench warfare...”.¹⁹ Rather, the tone that he adopted in these letters seems to have been both a characteristic of his general style when writing to intimate friends, and a reflection of his genuine bemusement at the reformers' lack of insight into what was, for him, central to all liturgical action: the fact (as he saw it) that man is, first and foremost, an artist, a maker, a user of signs. He does

¹⁵ A.M.Allchin, “A Discovery of David Jones” in *The World is a Wedding: Explorations in Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978) p. 162.

¹⁶ See especially the Preface to David Jones, *The Anathemata* (London, Faber, 1952). As he noted there (p. 13), “‘Tsar’ will mean one thing and ‘Caesar’ another to the end of time.”

¹⁷ See, for example, his letter to *The Tablet* published on 26th April 1958 and reprinted in *Epoch and Artist* pp. 260–261, in which he discusses the hymn *Vexilla Regis*.

¹⁸ *Dai Greatcoat* p. 249.

¹⁹ David Jones, Letter to Harman Grisewood of 6 July 1964, reprinted in *Dai Greatcoat* p. 207.

seem to have genuinely felt, as he put it in another letter, that “these blasted liturgists have a positive genius for knocking out *poiesis*.”²⁰

The question that faces us is that of whether he may have been right, if only instinctively. Take, for example, one of the issues to which Jones referred explicitly in the letter with which we began, in which he commented on “Old Sweat Mulligan” and the “oneness between the Offerant and those toughs that clustered round him.” The letter continues with an implied criticism of those who “declare that the turning round of the *mensa* . . . made the faithful more at one with the minister and so get back nearer to the Coena Domini”.²¹ For Jones himself, the matter could be taken no further. For us, however, it is at least possible to argue that there was a real loss in the change of orientation.

For the old position, with the priest aligned with the people, surely symbolized rather wonderfully the way in which the sacrifice of thanks and praise of the people is united with the total sacrifice of Christ (of whom the priest is here an icon,) and offered to God the Father. The classical liturgical pattern emphasized by Jungmann²² and embodied in the words of all recent liturgies – “To the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit” – is clearly affirmed in the symbolism of the orientation. This pattern is, moreover, conveyed instinctively to the likes of “Old Sweat Mulligan” as effectively as to those who are able to appreciate it at an intellectual level. The new orientation, by contrast, seems in danger of symbolizing, not the patristic and modern attitude to the nature of the eucharist, but rather that medieval one in which the classic trinitarian pattern was obscured through an emphasis on prayer to Christ himself. It would seem that what the presbyterian writer Thomas Torrance has characterized as liturgical Apollinarianism²³ has, just as it has disappeared at the verbal level, reappeared at the level of orientational symbolism.

This particular issue is, of course, a debatable one, since there may not only be aspects of the new orientation that outweigh these disadvantages, but it may also be that “best practice” indicates that the current orientation of the celebrant need not obscure the classical trinitarian pattern.²⁴ It is an issue that seems eloquent, all the same,

²⁰ David Jones, Letter to René Hague of 8–16 June 1966, reprinted in *Dai Greatcoat* p. 224.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² J.A.Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, tr. A.Peeler (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1965).

²³ Thomas F.Torrance, “The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy”, ch.4 of *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical Unity in East and West* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975).

²⁴ The classical liturgical action is, arguably, not entirely obscured with the new orientation when, either architecturally or in the bodily actions of the celebrant (or preferably both), there is a strong *vertical* dimension to the symbolism of the eucharistic action. In practice, however, it is too often the horizontal priest-people (Christ-church) interaction that is emphasized in orientational symbolism rather than any offering to the Father.

of an attitude that has become almost universal among western liturgists, and which was, indeed, explicitly used as a justification for many of the liturgical reforms of the twentieth century. This is the belief that everything except the *primary* symbolism of any particular liturgical action has the status of being, at best, unimportant, and at worst, through its ability to distract, actually harmful.

Ironically, this attitude came about in part through something that Jones could only have applauded: the second Vatican Council's positive emphasis on the way in which sacraments not only impart grace, but are also such that "the very act of celebrating them disposes the faithful most effectively to receive this grace in a fruitful manner, to worship God rightly, to practice charity".²⁵ For this passage from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy marks, as Mark Francis has rightly noted, "a new emphasis on the old scholastic dictum *sacramenta significando efficiunt gratiam* (sacraments cause grace by signifying). While there is no dispute about sacraments being efficient causes of grace, the documents of Vatican II insist that attention also be paid to how the grace is communicated .. The reforms in Roman Catholic Sacramental Worship mandated by the Council were essentially attempts to help the celebration of the sacraments 'signify' or communicate more effectively."²⁶

Among the changes that this renewed emphasis on communication brought about was a new outlook on such things as bodily actions, ministerial clothing, the sprinkling of water, and the use of incense. These were either simplified, reduced in frequency of usage, or demoted to the status of optional "extras" because they were perceived, quite simply, as having hindered this communication. As Francis puts it, it was precisely the attempt to help the sacraments to signify more effectively that was the motive for a stripping away of "secondary celebrative elements that tended to overshadow the central action of many of the sacraments."²⁷

This motivation was undoubtedly valid. We must ask, however, whether the perception of the hindering effect of "secondary celebrative elements," to which it was allied, was an accurate one, or whether, on the contrary, the effect of stripping away so many of these elements has been, not to heighten the signifying power of the central elements of liturgical action, but actually to dilute it. For, in the light of the sort of perspective that Jones helped to clarify – especially when this is supplemented by sociological insights – it is arguable that it may have been precisely the affirmation of sign-making that was communicated by "secondary elements" that made possible the effectiveness, humanly speaking, of the primary one.

²⁵ *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, article 59.

²⁶ Mark R. Francis, "Sacramental Theology", in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993) p. 586.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

What I mean by this is that – as Jones recognized and bewailed – an understanding of sign-making as central to the nature of humanity is now rather rare. It is limited to what some sociologists would call a “cognitive minority,” and from a sociological perspective, the maintenance of this minority requires that there exist, within that minority’s common life, effective “plausibility maintaining mechanisms” which act at a “pre-theoretical” level. What we find plausible and meaningful, in this perspective, is not so much a matter of the theoretical frameworks that we hold to be true, but the social actions that both symbolize and underpin these frameworks at this pre-theoretical level.²⁸ In relation to the religious cognitive minority that is the Church, this means that ritual and communally-received narrative, for example, are as much a precondition of doctrine as an expression of it or a didactic aid. (The fact that specifically theological expressions of this sort of insight are to be found in “linguistic” understandings of religious language, such as that of George Lindbeck,²⁹ is also perhaps significant here.)

Jones himself seems to have recognized an aspect of this when he complained about the tendency of Catholic apologists to see the sacraments in didactic terms – as “helps to our ‘infirm’ condition rather than as absolutely central and inevitable and inescapable to us as creatures . . . whose nature it is to *do this*, or that, rather than *think it*.”³⁰ Because the importance of the sociology of knowledge was only beginning to be widely recognized at the time of his death, however, he was unable to see that there is a sociological corollary of this kind of insight. This is that if a sacramental understanding depends on a “pretheoretical” acceptance of the efficacy of signs, then the plausibility maintaining mechanisms of any sacramentally-focused cognitive minority must reinforce belief in the general efficacy of signs with great vigour. Among other things, this means, arguably, that liturgical action must include a great deal of sign making, of the sort that was common before the reforms but is now much less evident. For it is, in this perspective, precisely the plethora and multi-layered nature of traditional liturgical sign-making that allows the central sign-making of liturgical action to be effective.

This is not, of course, to say that there should not be discrimination in the matter of “secondary elements.” The potential dangers inherent in their use is well illustrated by Jones’ own paintings, which

²⁸ The best brief introduction to this sociological perspective is perhaps P.L.Berger, B.Berger and H.Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974).

²⁹ G.Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1984). For many, the main problem with Lindbeck’s analysis is its essentially instrumentalist understanding of religious language. That this is not a necessary inference from his prime insights is, however, argued in Christopher C.Knight, *Wrestling With the Divine: Religion, Science, and Revelation* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001).

³⁰ Letter to René Hague of 8–16 June, 1966, reprinted in *Dai Greatcoat* p. 222.

often suffered, towards the end of his life, from what Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel characterize as a clogging with information in which, “where everything is given uniform importance as a sign, the total significance collapses under the strain.”³¹ Nevertheless, just as Jones’ best painting manifests a perfect balance between primary and secondary sign-bearing elements, so too the best liturgical practice seems to strike a similar balance.

All too often, however, by removing so much that is seen as secondary, current liturgical practice has the effect of isolating the sacraments from the sign-bearing human context that makes them, anthropologically, an appropriate means of grace. If Jones was right in saying that “without *ars* there is no possibility of *sacramentum*,” then just as, in the secular world, “works of art” have been isolated from the wider context of *poiesis* that he wanted to affirm, so also liturgical change has often had the effect of insulating sacraments, in the technical sense, from the wider sign-making framework that makes them effective. It is not simply, as Jones put it, that “these blasted liturgists have a positive genius for knocking out *poiesis*.”³² It is that once *poiesis* is knocked out in relation to secondary elements, it becomes ineffective in relation to the primary one which that knocking out was intended to reinforce.

In exploring this insight in the context of Jones’ thinking we need, however, to be very careful in our use of the term *sign*. For it is – as Miles’ and Shiel’s otherwise excellent study of Jones indicates – all too easy to miss what is implicit in his use of the term. When, for example, they note that Jones, as he grew older, “was agonized by what he considered to be a decline in sign-making,” they immediately comment that this was in the context of “an explosion of sign-making on a scale that could not have been possible in a less technologically advanced society.”³³ Perhaps, they suggest, Jones’ “inability to respond to electricity instead of candlelight... resulted from his being born in a place and at a moment which he experienced as an interface between the country and the city, the nineteenth and the twentieth century.”³⁴ The changing world order that Jones experienced meant, in their view, “a changing order of signs” that required “new evocations”,³⁵ and the inability of Jones to recognize this was one of his chief limitations.

Jones’ own perception that there was not “a changing order of signs” in this sense can, however, surely be affirmed. The “explosion

³¹ Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel, *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* (Bridgend, Seren, 1995) p. 241.

³² David Jones, Letter to René Hague of 8–16 June 1966, reprinted in *Dai Greatcoat* p. 224.

³³ Miles and Shiel, *David Jones* p. 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 293.

of sign making” of which Miles and Shiel speak, was, in fact, no more than an explosion of surface-level emblems of the sort that the advertising industry creates and manipulates. The fact that such emblems can occasionally transcend the context in which they were devised and acquire a deeper cultural significance need not, of course, be denied. Nevertheless, the relative rarity of this transformation is eloquent of the need to recognize the difference between signs, in the sense that Jones seems to have understood them, and contrived emblems.

To put it bluntly, some sorts of symbolism are effective because, for whatever reason, they seem “natural.” (The Jungian, for example, will say that this is because of the way in which they relate to archetypes of the collective unconscious.) Other attempts at symbolism have no deeper hold on us, even if there is no obvious reason why this should be the case. Though we may not understand why, a lit candle *is* a more profound symbol than an electric light bulb, just as the notion of Christ the shepherd of the sheep is more effective than that of Christ the managing director. The fact that we now live in an electrically-lit commercial society and not a candle-lit pastoral one has simply not rendered the old imagery redundant or allowed an alternative new imagery to emerge.³⁶

What this implies for liturgy is that, if we acknowledge the need for a restoration of sign-making activity over and above that which has been retained, this can not be done effectively simply by introducing the sort of contrived symbolism that is sometimes invented by liturgical experimentalists. Though new symbolism may occasionally prove effective, and should not be proscribed for experimental use, it must surely be to the tried, tested, and essentially *simple* sign-making of the traditional liturgies of both east and west that we must turn primarily. As the quality of the worship of the Taizé Community and of eastern rite Christians bears witness, it is primarily in things as rudimentary as verbal repetition, bodily action, contemplative chant and the simplest of sensual elements – water, light, incense, oil and the like – that the possibility of a rediscovery of liturgical *poiesis* lies.

Thus, it would seem, if David Jones may have been wrong about many of the specific aspects of liturgical reform that he lamented so vociferously, he may have been right in his more general and inarticulate sense that something was amiss. What is more, if he was at least partially right in thinking that the “blasted liturgists” of his own generation had had “a positive genius for knocking out *poiesis*,” important aspects of his thought suggest that a new generation of them might rather easily put it back in again. For what is required, in

³⁶ F. W. Dillistone (ed.), *Myth and Symbol* (London, 1966) still remains possibly the best introduction to this issue. See especially the essay in it by Ian T. Ramsey.

this perspective, is not a major re-writing of the service books, but simply an augmenting of their content by the sort of non-verbal sign-making with which our forebears were familiar.

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