

## Comment

### *David Jones*

David Jones died on 28 October 1974 in the nursing home of the Little Company of Mary in Harrow. Born on 1 November 1895, at Brockley in Kent, he went from art school to the killing fields of Flanders. That experience eventually yielded *In Parenthesis*, his first major poem (1937), which he did not think of as a 'War book', although that is now the standard interpretation. The narrative framework, it is true, is the six months until he was wounded in the Somme offensive, but the theme is the threat to humanity by mechanization and the relentless processes of technology. What concerns him is the destruction of 'a long-rooted, living community', settled on terrain 'made sacral by ancestral associations'. *In Parenthesis* is a lament for the desecration of 'ancient sites' by 'megalopolitan technocracy'.

The War brought David Jones to the Church. Sent out to collect firewood, he stumbled on a deserted outhouse. Looking through a crack in the wall he saw a few soldiers kneeling round an improvised altar. Fifty years later, it was 'the white altar-cloths and the white linen of the celebrant's alb and amice and maniple' that he remembered — 'the latter, I notice, has been abandoned, without a word of explanation, by these blasted reformers' (he was writing this in 1973 — the maniple in question was no doubt uniform with the priest's 'gilt-hued *planeta*'). He felt 'rather like an uninitiated bloke prying on the Mysteries of a Cult'. Even more, however, it was seeing the life of the French Catholic peasants that encouraged Jones to think of the Church. In effect, in the midst of the waste land of industrial civilization, increasingly given over to utilitarianism, he found in Catholicism the counter-cultural resource that would sustain his opposition to modern technology for the rest of his life. He dreamed of the kind of rural community that was rooted in seasonal religious practice. 'The many men so beautiful', after all, in *In Parenthesis*, 'kept equal step' because 'they had been nurtured together'.

To what extent the real and raw Catholic Church ever fulfilled his dream of an earthed and ancient sacramental religion, unviolated by industrial technocracy, is another matter. In 1921 he was received into the Catholic Church, and joined the craftsmen at Ditchling in Sussex, a lay Dominican community recently founded by Eric Gill, Hilary Pepler and Desmond Chute, very much under the inspiration of Vincent

McNabb OP. As the rest of his life was to show, however, he was happier living on his own in suburban London, once he had found his vocation, than in a family-based rural commune. For one thing, he was afflicted with migraines and increasingly with agoraphobia. He was content to stay in his room, a single room in a boarding-house, painting, writing and receiving friends.

He owed a good deal to Eric Gill, as may be seen in his essay in *Blackfriars* February 1941 (reprinted in *Epoch and Artist* 1959). The only other essay which he published in this journal, one of his earliest publications, if not in fact the first of all, was 'Beauty in Catholic Churches' (*Blackfriars* July 1926), not reprinted until now.

With *The Anathemata* (1952) and the fragments published as *The Sleeping Lord* (1974), David Jones sought to restore to the things around us the sheer gratuitous sacredness which is lost (as he believed) in an everyday perception pervaded by technocratic utilitarianism. But this is already his theme in 1926. One is tempted to wonder what he thought about the fate of Catholic churches and liturgy after Vatican II. Since by then he seldom left his room, he did not have much firsthand experience. No doubt visitors passed on titbits about iconoclastic a barbarism, and he continued to read *The Tablet*. But in 1926, long before anyone had conceived of liturgical 'changes', in what might be regarded as the heyday of English Catholicism, he was angered by the 'complete badness in the building and decoration' of the churches with which he was familiar — indeed, of the 'essentially malignant and even mortal nature of the infection'. Strong words!

Partly, he is protesting against those who have the confidence to educate the faithful — brash young clerics with prejudices and little judgment, of whom there are still some around. But mainly he is deploring the 'superstition' that, if the vestments and sacred vessels are beautiful, it does not matter about the 'shelves or pipes or rubber door-mats'. The sickness, however, lies not so much in depraved Catholic sensibility as in the 'tyranny' of a whole civilization. 'No great revolution in our present aesthetic expression is practicable outside the collapse of ordered society or something equivalent to it'. The 'grasp of the industrial system' is so omnipotent, Jones believes, that the chances of reversing the trend are very small. It is the 'sort of life we have', after all, that makes our churches so dismal. It is preferable to have 'tip-up plush seats and electric altar lights' than to have churches that ape the 'restraint and dignity' of the 'age of Faith'. — At least they would reveal what our life is really like! Whether many of us can now understand what he meant, seventy years on, surely remains very debatable.

F.K.