Martin Potter
University of Bucharest

TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRANSFIGURATIONS:
BRITISHNESS AND ROMANNESS ACROSS THE EPOCHS
IN EVELYN WAUGH AND DAVID JONES

Keywords: British identity, Roman Empire, Catholicism, transfiguration, historical parallels, art as sacramentality

Abstract: For British twentieth-century Catholic-convert writers Evelyn Waugh and David Jones coming to terms with their place in a British identity was problematic, given the way that concepts of Britishness had been shaped with reference to Protestantism, and with an anti-Catholic slant, since the Reformation. Like other British Catholic writers they approached this difficulty creatively by looking into history and reintegrating older understandings of the culture of the island of Britain into their own sense of Britishness, understandings in which Catholicism was a formative element. In both cases their interest in early British times brought them to engage imaginatively with the phenomenon of the Roman Empire, and ideas of parallels between the Roman and British Empires, and between the Roman Empire and the Church, become important to them. Through consideration of Waugh’s novel Helena and his Sword of Honour trilogy, and David Jones’s volumes of poetic work In Parenthesis, The Anathemata and The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments I shall discuss and compare the elements of durability and of transience in Britishness and Romanness as these writers understand them, and suggest that especially in the case of Romanness the transformation they show is also a transfiguration.