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

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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.*

The twentieth-century British Catholic authors Evelyn Waugh and David Jones saw a parallel between the world they were living in, that of the disintegration of the British and other empires, and of the two World Wars, and the late antique period when the Roman Empire dissolved. They used the idea of the late Roman Empire, Waugh mainly in one novel, *Helena* (and, I argue, indirectly in *Sword of Honour*) and Jones in the bulk of his poetic oeuvre, in *In Parenthesis*, *The Anathemata*, and the collection *The Sleeping Lord*, to represent and illuminate their understanding of their own period, as Catholics with a perspective which places them outside the modern British mainstream cultural narrative. I shall explore how they use the parallelism of the late Roman and British Empires to show the transience of both, but emphasise the transformation of the Roman Empire into the Christian world, and identify their Catholic identity as a transfigured, and durable, Roman identity, one which subsumes the elements their problematised sense of Britishness.

Waugh and Jones were members of a large group of Catholic literary converts, including G. K. Chesterton and Graham Greene, who had a strong cultural influence on twentieth-century Britain, and who followed in the footsteps of nineteenth-century literary converts John Henry Newman and Gerard Manley Hopkins. However, despite their important cultural role, Catholics felt marginalised in British society (Woodman xiii), a situation obtaining since the Reformation, when Catholicism had not only been ousted as the majority religion, but Catholics had also come to be seen as politically suspect, as they did not recognise the claims of the state religion. Catholic difficulties in identifying with the political and national allegiances of many of their compatriots were exacerbated by the fact that the establishment of a British state, uniting the English and Scottish crowns, after the Reformation, was presented as a Protestant political project; it is thus separate English, Welsh and Scottish identities which have a Catholic history,

to which Catholics can look back (Nichols 23-4). Waugh, despite some mixed ancestry, saw himself as English,[1] while Jones, a Londoner with a Welsh father and English mother, saw himself as Welsh and English, and treated the two identities as separate.

British Catholics are thus apt to have their own specific view of British history, often the mirror image of the majority view, and will tend to feel less estranged from medieval culture than their non-Catholic compatriots, as there is a strong continuity between medieval culture and their own culture. The Catholic affinity for the Middle Ages is in contrast to the majority post-reformation British attitude, which, with the exception of some nineteenth-century currents, has tended to treat the Middle Ages as a dark age, and to look to the Classical pre-Christian period as a model. This popular British pro-classical attitude is exemplified by Edward Gibbon, a writer whom Waugh intended to counter with his novel *Helena* (Wykes 158-65). In thinking back to the Roman Empire, and particularly to the later period when Christianity was emerging, Waugh and Jones aimed to celebrate, rather than to lament, in the manner of Gibbon, Christianity's supersession of the Empire. The late antique period offered parallels with the twentieth century, being a period of political turbulence and philosophical ferment, and one in which a world-wide power, the Roman Empire, moved from international dominance to dismemberment. Waugh and Jones, with their marginal position in the British Empire as Catholics, identify with the early Christians in the Roman Empire rather than with the pagan rulers. Thus a literary portrayal of the world of the late Roman Empire in their hands can function as a critique of the modern world they are living in from the point of view of partial outsiders.

Helena (first published in 1950) is a comparatively late novel by Waugh, written after *Brideshead Revisited*, the novel which marks the turning point at which he starts to introduce explicitly religious themes into his novels, his earlier satirical novels having been critiques of the modern secular world but not offering solutions to the problems diagnosed. *Helena* portrays the life of the Roman Emperor Constantine's mother, culminating in her finding of the True Cross in Jerusalem. Waugh takes advantage of the existence of a legend to the effect that Helena was born in Britain, and this enables him to set up an allegory of Catholic Britishness set in the late Roman Empire. He warns the reader in the preface that he will be using 'certain wilful anachronisms which are introduced as a literary device' (9), thus hinting at the parallels to his own time he is intending the novel to carry. He sets up the parallels in the first section of the novel, which shows the young Helena at home in her father's palace in Colchester, just as she meets her future husband and Constantine's future father, Constantius. The first element in the building up of the parallel between modern and ancient Britain is the description of Helena herself. Like a modern British teenager from an aristocratic background, she loves horses and sports, dislikes Latin, and to emphasise her Britishness further, is red-haired. She is shown speaking in twentieth-century British slang – 'What a lark! ... What a sell!' (20) she remarks on hearing the story of Paris' abduction of Helen – and she shows strong signs of empirical tendencies in line with the British tradition, at this early stage as well as throughout the novel, demanding, for example, of her tutor Marcias whether the remains of Troy can still be seen, and resolving to go and discover them in the future (15). In the treatment of Helena's father, Waugh acknowledges a difficulty in making third-century Colchester represent twentieth-century Colchester, in that whereas the area is now in England, there was no England in Helena's time, the Anglo-Saxons having yet to arrive, and the Celtic Britons being the ancestors of the Welsh. Waugh has made Helena appear rather English, but he introduces Welsh allusions by making Helena's father the legendary Celtic king, Coel, spelt in the Welsh rather than the English way, and describes a banquet given by Coel for his Roman visitors, including Constantius, during which bardic poetry about ancestors is sung, and not in Latin but in the local language, details likely to bring to the reader's mind associations with Welsh

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[1] See Waugh *A Little Learning* chapter 1, 1-26, for details on his ancestry.

culture. The continuity between Roman British culture and modern Welsh culture here hinted at is a key theme for David Jones. A further early indication of the trans-historical parallel is the way that Waugh portrays the military figures in the first chapter. He does his best to show Constantius and the local District Commander talking and behaving like British army officers of the twentieth century, and to represent them discussing troubles in far-flung imperial provinces, such as Persia, in the same way that military officials might have during the period of the British Empire,[2] still continuing but in decline when Waugh wrote *Helena*. An important contrast between the third- and twentieth-century sides of the comparison is the fact that Britain was a far-flung province itself in the third century, not the metropolis, and Waugh points to this fact in various ways, for example having the District Commander mention that Britain is officially under the command of Gaul (19) and describing King Coel at the banquet as wearing a toga at table 'contrary to metropolitan fashion' (25).

An important exchange between Helena and Constantius, now married, on their way to Constantius' Eastern European homeland in Illyria, begins to hint at a new significance for the Roman Empire, other than the parallel with the modern British Empire that the novel has suggested up to this point. They are travelling past the wall dividing the Empire from the outside, somewhere in Germany, and the conversation is set off by Helena remarking that the wall in Britain (Hadrian's Wall) is of stone, unlike the one they are travelling past, which is described 'a rough ditch and palisade of timber' (38). Helena's counters Constantius' enthusiasm about the wall and his effusions about its role dividing civilisation from the barbarians by questioning whether there must always be a wall, and whether those beyond the wall could have a share in the City (by which she means Rome). Constantius misinterprets what she is saying as meaning that she is talking about the expansion of the Empire's boundaries by conquest, and, when she says she does not mean this, does not understand her at all. She cannot herself explain what she means at this stage, but she seems to be anticipating a new understanding of 'the City' which she will gain after her conversion: that the Heavenly City in St. Augustine's sense, will include people not just of the old Roman Empire, even if in a physical sense still centred in Rome.[3] This passage is a pointer to her later understanding shown in operation when the much older Helena, already Empress, is exploring Rome for the first time. She feels about the crowds quite differently from the way she had before her conversion:

> She was in Rome as a pilgrim and she was surrounded by friends. There was no way of telling them. There was nothing in their faces. A Thracian or a Teuton might stop a fellow countryman in the streets, embrace him and speak of home in his own language. Not so Helena and the Christians. The intimate family circle of which she was a member bore no mark of kinship. ... There was no mob, only a vast multitude of souls, clothed in a vast variety of body, milling about in the Holy City, in the Sea of Peter. (93)

What can be seen here is the acquisition by the Roman idea of a new identity, a spiritual one. Rome has started to mean the Church, the Catholic Church in particular, and this is why the idea of boundaries loses its significance, although the geographical centre remains the same.

Helena illustrates the ideas of durability and transience in relation to both Britishness and Romanness. The Britain of Helena's youth is one inhabited principally by British Celts, and is a peripheral province of an international empire, so by the arrival of the twentieth century dramatic change has occurred, given the dominance of a new ethnicity (the English) and the centring of an international empire on Britain. Continuity nevertheless is also present, in the continuing presence of the British Celts'

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[2] On Helena's slang, and soldiers, see Patey 294-5.
[3] On Helena's open City see Littlewood 166, 232.

descendents, in the form of the Welsh and others, in Britain, and the Celtic influence on British Culture as a whole, as well of course as in physical constants such as the climate and the fact of being an island. In the case of the Roman Empire, it has ceased to exist as a secular empire, but its cultural influence has persisted, and the Christian Churches have carried on Roman forms but with a spiritualised meaning. So the case of the transformation of the Roman Empire into the Church is a case of durability and change simultaneously, with originally secular forms taking on a different, spiritual significance, making it a case not only of transformation but also of transfiguration.

Interesting light can be thrown on Waugh's attitude to British and Roman identity in *Helena* by comparing it with his novel *Sword of Honour*, originally a trilogy, based on his experiences of serving in the Second World War.[4] Guy Crouchback, protagonist and partial self-portrait of Waugh, is a Catholic Englishman who has grown up to a large extent in Italy, and returns to Britain to join the army when the Second World War starts, hoping, partly, to affirm his British identity. Crouchback is shown incurring the suspicions of others in the army because of his fluency in Italian, and, in a significant episode, while stationed in Croatia, he is able to speak in Latin to the parish priest of the church which he has been attending, and this way arranges for a mass to be said for his wife who has just been killed by an air-raid in England (623), an action foreign to most British people but which Crouchback and the priest, as Catholics, understand. When compared with *Helena*, written during the same post-Second World War period as *Sword of Honour* (*Helena* appearing two years before *Men at Arms*, the first instalment of *Sword of Honour*), Waugh's vision of continuing Romanness in the form of the Catholic Church can be seen affecting a British Catholic's sense of where he can be at home. Crouchback is at home, at least on a spiritual level, with Italians and Croats, whether or not he can speak their language, and this is a level on which he is not at home with many British people. While this ability to find a spiritual home should extend to any place where he can find a Catholic church, that is, including beyond the walls of the old Empire, those places where Crouchback is shown finding connections with his spiritual family (Italy and Croatia) happen to be within the old Latin Western Empire, just as Waugh describes Helena settling happily in three locations which are in the Western Empire and are in the twentieth century still Catholic: the Dalmatian coast, Trèves (Trier) and Rome. The old Empire allowed Helena to communicate linguistically, in Latin, with others, within its boundaries – at least in the Western Empire. The new secular, military empire, that is, the British Empire, gives Crouchback the same linguistic facility within its bounds, but on a spiritual level the successor of the old Empire is the Church, and it provides a spiritual geography for Crouchback, invisible to his non-Catholic compatriots. Thus in Waugh's vision a secular empire (the Roman) is transient at a secular level, and is replaced by others (such as the British) of similar function, but it gives birth to a spiritual identity which is durable in the shifting secular climate.

David Jones was, like Waugh, from the London area and a Catholic convert. He was a poet, who also achieved prominence in the visual arts, served in the First World War, and had a Welsh father. Jones understands poems, and other works of art, as signs in the sacramental sense, material signifiers of spiritual truths, analogous to the sacraments of the Church. Given Jones' theory of a cumulative cultural inheritance of allusions and signs, relevant to each locality, out of which poetry can be made, the poet's understanding of the cultural history of the place on which his poetry centres, in Jones' case, Britain, is crucial. Jones identified himself early with the culture of his Welsh father, and his awareness of things Welsh shapes his vision of the early history of the island, since he explores in a detailed way what Waugh hints at, that is that the indigenous culture in Britain at the time of the Roman Empire is now that culture

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[4] *Sword of Honour* was first published as a single novel in 1965, and originally appeared as three separate novels: *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955) and *Unconditional Surrender* 1961).

principally represented by the Welsh.[5] Jones focuses imaginatively in especial on the late antique period, partly because this period marks the beginnings of the Welsh cultural tradition, and also because of a theory, at least to some extent derived by Jones from Spengler, to the effect that the period of the decline of the Roman Empire represents a phase in a cycle of social history which is being repeated during the twentieth century with the decline of the British Empire and, as Jones and Spengler see it, European civilisation.[6] This sense of a parallel between the two periods matches Waugh, as does a further important element in Jones' understanding of the late antique period and its cultural significance, which is as the period of the emergence of Christianity as the replacement for pagan civilisation in the Roman Empire. Like Waugh, Jones sees the Church, particularly the Catholic Church, as the continuation of the Roman Empire on another, spiritual, level.

In Parenthesis (first published in 1937), Jones' first major written work, is a kind of long poem, containing a mixture of verse and prose, describing his experiences as a soldier during the First World War.[7] He portrays himself as a character called John Ball, serving in a mixed Welsh and London regiment, as he did himself. The mixed regiment represents a joining of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements that together contribute to the British cultural complex, as he explains in the preface: 'Together they bore in their bodies the genuine tradition of the Island of Britain ...'(x). *In Parenthesis* combines meticulous description of the physical detail of life in and behind the trenches with an invocation of multiple strands of Welsh and English folk culture, and Welsh, English and European literary tradition. Prominent sources of literary symbolism are the early Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*, the Arthur legends, particularly via Malory, and the Latin liturgy. The sixth-century poem *Y Gododdin* and the Arthur legends both spring from the era of the collapse of the Roman Empire, and describe the unsuccessful attempts of the Celtic Britons, who were left without the protection of the Roman legions, to ward off the incoming Germanic Anglo-Saxons, a confrontation which, however, has later turned into the cohabitation of the Welsh and English on the same island, and even into a certain fusion of traditions, as illustrated by Jones' use of the English writer Malory for his Arthurian quotations. The idea of heroic military defeat but continuation in culture is linked for Jones with Welsh and Celtic cultural survival, [8] and also takes on a religious significance, acting as a parallel with the Gospels, particularly given the fact that the Romanised Celts were often Christian, but defeated by a pagan people, who were nevertheless subsequently converted.[9] In the context of the catastrophe of the First Word War these cultural references seem to promise hope on a spiritual level in calamitous circumstances. David Jones' view of the post-Roman Celtic Britons as continuers of Roman imperial traditions, expanded on in his essays,[10] and hinted at here, together with Latin liturgical quotations introduced during the final section (Part 7), suggest an underlying message affirming the possibility of some kind of cultural and spiritual, especially Catholic, survival, amid the ruin of European civilisation that Jones saw the First World War as representing, paralleling the spiritual survival of Christianity, even preserving Roman cultural forms, from amid the violent collapse of Classical civilisation.

David Jones' long poem, *The Anathemata* (first published 1952) is a complex evocation of British history, in eight parts, mainly in English but containing Welsh, Latin, and also German, words and

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[5] On Jones' emphasis on the necessity of an understanding of Welsh culture for an understanding of the whole island's culture, see Blamires 10.

[6] For Spengler's influence on Jones' historical understanding see Corcoran 4-5.

[7] December 1915 to July 1916 (Jones *In Parenthesis* ix).

[8] On the cultural survival of the Celts see Jones 'The Dying Gaul' in Jones *The Dying Gaul* 50-8.

[9] On connections between the Arthur legends, *Y Gododdin*, the Roman Empire and Christianity see Jones 'The Arthurian Legend' in Jones *Epoch and Artist* 202-11 and Jones 'The Myth of Arthur' in ibid. 212-59.

[10] See, for example, 'Wales and the Crown' in Jones *Epoch and Artist* 39-48.

phrases, and alluding strongly to the Roman eucharistic liturgy. While the first section ('Rite and Foretime') covers prehistory and introduces the liturgical theme (Corcoran 44), the second section ('Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea') traces the origins of British civilisation in Mediterranean civilisation, describing the voyage of a ship (also representing the Church) in the antique period, from the Mediterranean to Britain (Corcoran 49). The third section ('Angle-Land') describes the meeting of the Britons with the arriving Anglo-Saxons. The following two sections ('Redriff', and 'The Lady of the Pool') are about the cultural inheritance of London. While 'Redriff' concentrates on ship-building, and thus the way that material considerations contribute to the shaping of the culture, Jones' own family on his mother's side having earlier been involved in ship-building in the Thames estuary (Corcoran 56, 58), 'The Lady of the Pool' emphasises the way that Roman, Celtic and English elements overlay each other to form a whole in the myth of London, bringing out, for example, little-known, at least to an English readership, connections between locations in the City of London and figures in Welsh mythology, such as Ludgate being named after King Lud, a Celtic mythological character who appears in Welsh as Lludd (Jones *The Anathemata* 124 note 1), and the head of another figure, Brân, being buried under the White Mount, that is, the site of the Tower of London, and protecting the whole island (Jones *The Anathemata* 163 note 3). After the section 'Keel, Ram, Stauros', in which there is a return journey to the Mediterranean, the final two sections ('Mabinog's Liturgy' and 'Sherthursdaye and Venus Day') bring out the religious dimension of the poem, comparing myth and liturgy according to Jones' theory of art as a sacramental activity (Corcoran 67). Allusions to the twentieth century are most obvious in the modern slang used by the narrating character in 'The Lady of the Pool', and there is possibly an oblique reference in this same section to the bombing of London during the Second World War, which Jones had lived through by this time, in the phrase 'THIS BOROUGH WERE NEVER FORCED' (163, see Dilworth 155), so that the parallel between the civilisational collapse of the Roman order and the apparent collapse of the modern Western order is indicated, as in *In Parenthesis*. The preoccupations with the Roman inheritance of Britain and of the Welsh in particular, the mixing of Welsh and English culture in the formation of British culture, and the culturally formative importance of the late antique period, are again all fundamental in the poem, and in addition the idea that the spiritual expression of this cultural tradition is possible in the Catholic liturgy. Thus we once again see the durability of a cultural and spiritual tradition against the background of the transience of secular orders.

The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments (first published in 1974) is a collection of shorter poems and fragments, which revisits issues of Welsh, British, Roman and Christian identity. The comparison of the experience of soldiers of the Roman and British Empires is important in these poems, as it was for Waugh in *Helena*. Four of the poems ('The Wall', 'The Dream of Private Clitus', 'the Fatigue' and 'The Tribune's Visitation') are set in Roman Jerusalem, and are inspired by the idea, which occurred to Jones on his visit to the Jerusalem of the British Mandate, that like the British soldiers he saw stationed there, there might have been Roman soldiers of British origin stationed there during the antique period (Jones 'Letter to Saunders Lewis April 1971' in Hague ed. 56-7). In the 'Tribune's Visitation', for example, Jones presents a blend of Roman and twentieth-century British military language (see Pagnoulle 59): 'On the same *limes*, sir, South Sub-Sector, sir, in front of Fosse 60, sir, the other ...' (46). Whereas the British and Roman imperial orders are presented as bureaucratic and utilitarian, the Celtic soldiers, for example in 'The Fatigue', fall outside the Roman Imperial utilitarian ethos, having a sense of wonder, and are liable to be regarded as outsiders (Pagnoulle 42), like Catholics in Britain. In 'The Sleeping Lord' the idea of a buried Celtic prince evokes the Arthur legend, the idea of the return of a prince, and again suggests Celtic culture as prefiguring the Christian message of spiritual victory in physical defeat.

While Jones espouses an explicit theory of art, which he elaborates in, among other places, his essay 'Art and Sacrament' (Jones *Epoch and Artist* 143-79), which explains any act of artistic creation as

analogous to a religious sacrament, his understanding of the relationship of art and spirit is implicit in Waugh's later writings as well, as in those of many Catholic writers, and may be described as the theory of sacramentality, which is the view that the material world may be infused by the spiritual world, and thereby transfigured. Adoption of this theory, with its insistence on the reality of both the material and spiritual worlds, allows Catholic writers to distinguish themselves philosophically from what they see as the modern materialist, or spiritualist, mainstream (the Catholic position, espoused, for example, by Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man*, being that the modern worldview treats the universe as either only material or only spiritual), and to contrast a transient material dimension with a durable spiritual one, to the formation of which the material nevertheless contributes. Both authors show a Roman imperial civilisation which is material, and transient, but which is transfigured in its development into the Church, while the Roman Empire is compared to the material and transient British Empire, which can also be transfigured if, and to the extent that, it becomes part of a spiritual history or histories. While Jones and Waugh problematise Britishness, either dividing it into Englishness and Welshness, or emphasing the semi-outsider status of Catholics in a Protestant society, they show that the individual twentieth-century British Catholic, formed by a bundle of seemingly contradictory elements of identity, can transcend his or her contradictions and find a durable spiritual identity which survives and absorbs traces of transient secular histories.

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