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CULTURAL MEMORY AS TRADITION AND SACRAMENT IN DAVID JONES' POETRY

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Abstract: *In this paper two aspects of cultural memory in the poetry of the twentieth-century Anglo-Welsh poet, essayist and artist, David Jones, will be discussed: tradition and sacrament. Jones works with a specific understanding of cultural traditions as living traditions, created by poets performing their bardic function (as well as by other artists), with later stages of the tradition building on and adding to, but not cancelling out, earlier stages. His theory of tradition can be illuminated with reference to the work of theoretical writers such as John Henry Newman and Alasdair MacIntyre (as well as with reference to his own theoretical writings). Jones believes that the poet's function is to embody the cultural tradition by producing poetic works in which the tradition is "really present", and sees this process as analogous to religious sacrament – he performs this function himself in his poetry, as well as explaining it in his theoretical writing. His aspiration is also to gather together as much as he can of his local cultural tradition for inclusion in his works, in order to save it, by re-embodying it in his contribution to the continuation of the tradition. The idea of art works as containing truths which are "really present" can be theorised in terms both of Catholic (Thomistic), as in Jones' own theorising, and of phenomenology and hermeneutics – statements by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty will be compared with Jones' formulations. This paper will outline the theory behind Jones' understanding of the concepts of tradition and sacrament in relation to poetry, as well as showing how he performs the embodying function, and at the same time thematises it, in his poetry.*

For the Anglo-Welsh poet and artist David Jones the history and development of culture was always a central concern, and he believed both that the culture of a given place and people at any time contained layers of content analogous to geological strata, and that it was the calling of poets to embody the culture of their communities, including the culture's various layers, in their poetic works. In embodying the cultural memory of a community in his works Jones also saw his activity as a poet as sacramental, making a reality present in another form. This essay will explore both how Jones understood culture as tradition, and how he understood poetry (and art generally) as sacrament, will show the way that these two visions are connected, and will link Jones' ideas with those of various philosophers, both from the Catholic-Thomist and phenomenological-hermeneutic traditions, who either influenced him, or whose writings throw light on his aesthetic

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theory or may contribute to completing it. The way that Jones both practises and thematises his theories in his own poetry will also be examined, with reference to *The Anathemata* and “The Sleeping Lord”.

Jones saw the role of poets in terms of a recording of the cultural traditions in which they were embedded, a role he describes in the preface of his major poetic work *The Anathemata*, asserting that whether a poet has a well defined “bardic” role in a given society, or is working in a late society without a socially prescribed role, a poet’s task is to use language in such a way as to achieve the maximum of cultural evocation (*The Anathemata* 20-1). Jones frequently uses the word “deposits” to describe the contents of the cultural tradition in this preface, suggesting the way that cultural memory is accumulated in a way similar to a geological process, such as the forming of a land bank by a river. This geological comparison allows Jones to draw attention to the role of a given land in the formation of a cultural tradition, and he prefers to talk of the cultural tradition of Island of Britain, rather than that of the English, Welsh or Scottish peoples, for example, although he would see such peoples as all laying strata in the overall accumulation. In Jones’ view poets should embody in their poetry the culture they are familiar with, and are thus tied to the local.¹ As a consequence he largely writes about British culture, while maintaining that the culture of Britain is a branch of the culture of Western Europe, as he asserts, for example, in the essay “An Aspect of the Art of England” (*The Dying Gaul* 60).

An important aspect of his understanding of the poet’s relation to the cultural tradition, is that he believes the poet should gather together as much as possible of surrounding cultural tradition, in order to preserve and celebrate it, as he explains at the beginning of the preface to *The Anathemata*, citing the ancient British historian Nennius’ declaration that he had collected everything he could find in his *Historia Brittonum* (*The Anathemata* 9), and in fact the title of the poem, *The Anathemata*, as Jones goes on to discuss, is interpretable as “devoted things” (28), or even “Things set up, lifted up, or in whatever manner made over to the gods.” (29) His emphasis on inclusiveness leads him to look back to the earliest human history of the lands he writes about, as in *The Anathemata*, in which the first section of the poem surveys the geological formation of Britain and Western Europe, and mentions archaeological finds connected with prehistoric inhabitants of Britain. He also abundantly represents pre-Christian religion and legend, although his own worldview is explicitly Christian, as for him pre-Christian beliefs are an anticipation of Christianity.

The artist, in Jones’ theory, in order to gather together and save as much of a culture as possible, must use symbols carrying the most meaning possible, and, in the case of a poet, words with the maximum of associations and overtones. As Jones puts it, the “means” which is an efficient cause of poetry involves “squeezing every drain of evocation from the word-forms of that language or languages” (*The Anathemata* 20), that is of the language or languages used by the poet. For Jones this is a practical and objective task, and he is preoccupied by the limitations imposed by the poet’s situation in place and time, and in particular worries that in

¹ Jones often discusses the importance of the local, but a particularly sustained meditation on the subject can be found in his essay ‘James Joyce’s Dublin’.

modernity words and concepts are not widely understood symbolically, such that a modern audience may not be receptive to art-works which depend on associations the audience can no longer make. As an example he imagines a poet writing “wood”, and speculates that the associations connected with “the Wood of the Cross” may not be evoked in many modern readers, thus limiting the poet’s ability to achieve certain meanings with the poem (23). So, Jones’ theory of art in relation to the cultural tradition is that artists should evoke as much of the cultural tradition of their time and place as they can, that they are dependent on that tradition for elements available to them to work with, and that they help to perpetuate and develop it through their work.

Jones’ attitude to cultural tradition has an important precedent in English Catholic thinking, in the person of Newman, and the school of thought on tradition which Newman and Jones are both part of has been continued by philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. Newman’s major work on the concept of tradition is *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, a theological treatise, which he wrote in order to vindicate the Catholic theory of the development of doctrine. The work however has implications for the understanding of cultural development from a Catholic point of view, while it is also of interest for its detailed analysis of how a tradition of ideas can develop while staying true to its roots. Newman draws attention to the principle, also espoused, for example, by Aquinas, that Christianity did not replace earlier wisdom, but added to it – a principle important to Jones (and which Newman expresses clearly in another major work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*).² Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor both make the point that human cultures take the form of narratives of their own development, while MacIntyre makes a detailed analysis of how traditions of thought grow, and how they confront, and sometimes absorb, or are absorbed by, rival traditions.³

Jones’ theory on the way art is analogous to religious sacrament comes into relation with his understanding of cultural tradition because it is the cultural tradition which a work of art “transubstantiates” in a manner analogous to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Jones works with the traditional Catholic theory of sacrament, which is based on the idea that a physical reality can signify, and indeed carry, a spiritual reality. While all the seven sacraments recognised in Catholic theology work in this way, Jones finds the sacrament of the Eucharist particularly relevant in describing how a work of art represents a reality, and, in his famous essay, “Art and Sacrament”, takes Hogarth’s painting *The Shrimp Girl* as an example and explains how a reality corresponding to Hogarth’s conception (not the Shrimp Girl herself) is, in the painting, “really present under the form of paint” (*Epoch and Artist* 175) – a formulation meant to recall theological explanations of transubstantiation, that is, the way in which the Body of Christ is really present under the forms of consecrated bread and wine. In connection with this illustration

² “They come, not so much to lose what they have, as to gain what they have not; and in order that, by means of what they have, more may be given to them” (201).

³ See, for example, MacIntyre ‘Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science’ 3-23, and Taylor *Sources of the Self* 47-52.

of his theory, Jones writes of how art “re-presents” (173), explaining that the hyphenated form comes closer to capturing the way an artwork is a ‘signum’ (174), under which a given re-presented reality is really present. If the art work in question is one of Jones’ own poems, it is clear that he will be intending to gather together as much cultural memory as he can and make it really present in his poem, thus adding his own deposit to the cultural tradition.

There are intriguing parallels between Jones’ explanation of how the arts work in a way analogous to the sacraments, and statements to be found in writings by philosophers in the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Gadamer, in his essay on art *Die Aktualität des Schönen*, argues that representation in an artwork is similar to the presence of Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, and that, since what is indicated in an art work is present in it, as well as being present in its original manifestation, there is, due to an artwork, more being (“Das Kunstwerk bedeutet einen Zuwachs an Sein” – “The artwork means an increase in being” 47, translation mine) – while, in contrast, a tool is replaceable, and thus is not unique and responsible for an increase in the amount of being there is. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty, in his study on painting *L’Œil et L’Esprit* describes the turning of the world into painting as “transubstantiations” (16), although he does not discuss the theological parallel explicitly in the way Gadamer does. He also insists on the presence of the represented reality in the representation, arguing, for example, that Mont Sainte-Victoire is present in Cézanne’s paintings of it.

The ‘instant of world’ which Cézanne wanted to paint and which passed long ago continues to be projected to us by his canvases and his Mont Sainte-Victoire is made and re-made from one end of the world to the other, in a different way, but no less energetically, than in the hard rock above Aix (35). (translation mine)

It is notable that, just as for Jones, it is a reality grasped by Hogarth on seeing the Shrimp Girl, and not the physical Shrimp Girl, which is re-presented in the painting,⁴ equally, for Merleau-Ponty, it is a moment of being in the world, in which the mountain is involved (as well as Cézanne), which is re-presented in Cézanne’s many paintings of the mountain.

So, Jones’ concepts of cultural tradition and sacrament combine to provide an agenda for him when he writes his own poetry. He conspicuously puts his theories into practice in his poems, and also explicitly thematises the theories. His long work *The Anathemata* and his medium length poem “The Sleeping Lord” (which lends its name to his collection *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*) are particularly good examples of how he both realises his own theory and draws attention to this realisation.

The Anathemata is a long poem, published as a single-volume work, containing eight sections, together with a substantial preface, and it is the second of

⁴ Williams formulates Jones’ view in this way: “Something like the whole active presence of the object is being re-presented by the artist – not simply the *reproduction* of aspects of its appearance...” 62

his two major long works, the first being *In Parenthesis*, a poetic account of his experiences as a soldier in the First World War. *The Anathemata* is a kind of epic poem, in that Jones seeks to represent a broad picture of the development of the culture and history of the island of Britain in it, but, unlike a traditional epic, it has no clear continuous narrative line, and much of it takes place without named characters. A narrative thread featuring in five of the poem's eight sections, and providing some sense of continuity, is that of a ship departing from the ancient Mediterranean, sailing towards Britain, docking at the Port of London and returning to the Mediterranean – although the fact that no one on the ship is named, beyond “captain”, and that the sections at the Port of London seem to take place at a much later historical period than the others, makes it unclear if a continuous narrative thread is intended. In fact the changes in the apparent time when sections are set, despite what could otherwise be interpreted as a continuous line of action, gives a strong sense of the unity of identity of the places through time, since a sea captain, for example, might have sailed a ship from the Mediterranean to the Port of London at any time from Antiquity until the mid twentieth century.

The Anathemata begins with a section, “Rite and Fore-time”, which exemplifies the various facets of Jones' approach to cultural memory. “Rite and Fore-time” provides a pre-historical prelude to what is otherwise a historical poem, remembering the geological formation of the island of Britain, along with Western Europe, to which Britain was attached before becoming an island, as well as commemorating those human inhabitants who preceded the historical period, and left no written records. Starting with prehistory is part of Jones' commitment to gather as much as he can, and represent the broadest cultural perspective he is able to, within the limitation of staying inside the geographical area he is familiar with. An important indication of his intention to gather everything he can into the cultural tradition is the mention he makes of a prehistoric cult item, followed by a prayer for whoever made it: “Whoever he was/ *Dona ei requiem/ sempiternam.*” (“Give him eternal rest”). “He would not lose him/ *...non perdidit/ ex eis quemquam.*” (“I have not lost any of them” 66). The Latin parts of the quotation are extracts from the Latin liturgy, including a prayer for the dead, and, as Jones points out in a note, an extract from the Good Friday liturgy (66 note 1). He wants to include such prehistoric craftsmen in his recollection, because their artistic activity, however rudimentary, demonstrates their humanity, as he explains in another footnote (60 note 1), and, as he argues in a further footnote, any being making artefacts gratuitously, as signs rather than as tools, is human and “should be regarded as participating directly in the benefits of the Passion” (65 note 2). So Jones is including early creators of culture in his own cultural creation, encapsulating the cultural tradition of the place as it has developed from its beginnings up to his time, and also asserting that, on a religious level, the salvific effects of Christ's Passion are applicable to all capable of creating culture – thus the divine plan is a gathering up of all culture-creators (i.e. human beings), just as Jones' poetic plan is the gathering up of all the culture of his locality, or at least an attempt to symbolise such an activity.

The section “Rite and Fore-time” also contains explicit reference to the sacramental dimension through a representation of a phase of the Eucharistic liturgy

right at the section's beginning, and thus at the beginning of the whole poem. Jones portrays a priest, celebrating the mass, or "making this thing other" (49) – and the priest says the words "ADSCRIPTAM, RATAM, RATIONABILEM" ("ascribed, ratified, reasonable") (idem), and "the holy and venerable hands lift up an efficacious sign" (idem). The part of the mass, or the sacrament of the Eucharist, which Jones is presenting, is the prayer just before the consecration, when the priest asks that the gifts (the bread and wine) may be worthy to be consecrated. Placed at the beginning of the poem these words can be interpreted as, in part, Jones' prayer that his assembly of memories may be worthy to be transformed into a work of art, and to be a contribution to the cultural tradition as it will be constituted henceforth. The Latin quotation, as well as the words "the holy and venerable hands", are taken from the classical form of the Roman liturgy, and are thus themselves part of a cultural monument, recalling the times the liturgy has been celebrated in that form and using those words over the centuries. Jones clearly intends his own poem to be an efficacious sign as well, a form of words in which the culture of the island of Britain is really present. That he has chosen a stage of the liturgy at which an offering is being made, combined with the title of the poem, *The Anathemata*, suggestive of things offered, and the concern with the salvation of pre-historic individuals shown during the "Rite and Fore-time" section, indicates another component to the sacramental analogy: in addition to a changing into something – a transubstantiation of cultural memory into work of art – taking place, an offering is also being made. The poem is a prayer offering up the cultural tradition it encapsulates on behalf of the human population which has contributed to the creating of the tradition over the centuries. This element of meaning is supported by the words "for *them*, under modes and patterns altogether theirs" (49) – the mass is for humanity, and couched in forms familiar and man-made (e.g. bread and wine),⁵ and the poem is offered, again, for humanity, and embodies human culture.

Jones' poem "The Sleeping Lord" was published in a collection which bears its name, and like many of his published works is an unfinished fragment of a projected longer work.⁶ Similarly to *The Anathemata* "The Sleeping Lord" begins with pre-history and archaeology, but its archaeological motif derives from the tomb of a Palaeolithic person, discovered in South Wales, who becomes the sleeping lord of the poem. Jones in much of his work shows a fascination for the theme of buried heroes, such as Arthur, and it is a motif which can be seen as representing the way that the history of human culture can be compared with the formation of the land through accumulation, as well as tying a given local strand of human culture to the place where it has developed.

The poem moves on to show a priest celebrating the mass in a medieval Welsh aristocratic household. The poem uses a large amount of Welsh vocabulary to depict the scene, following Jones' own theory that a translation of a word often fails to carry the same cultural associations, such that the poet may find it necessary

⁵ Jones makes the point in the preface to *The Anathemata* that bread and wine are both examples of what he calls "artefacture" (31), that is, products of human skill, thus the sacrament has been instituted in such a way as to be dependent on human making.

⁶ See his preface to the poem *The Sleeping Lord* 70.

to use a word not belonging to the main language of the poem in order to establish a particular cultural picture (as he discusses in the preface to *The Anathemata* – “‘Tsar’ will mean one thing and ‘Caesar’ another to the end of time.” 13) However, as in *The Anathemata*, he writes his own, copious footnotes, to ensure that the readers can make associations they otherwise would miss. An example of a Welsh word used is *neuadd*, which means hall, as in a manor house (he specifies that he means “The hall ... of a Welsh Chieftain” *The Sleeping Lord* 78 note 2), and this is a case where using an English word would bring with it a different set of cultural associations, out of place here. In describing the liturgy in the poem both Welsh and Latin words are interspersed with the English text.

The stage of the mass at which the priest is shown is again the central section in which the Consecration happens, but in this case the concentration is on a prayer just after the Consecration, when the priest remembers various people, and asks that the benefits of the sacrament may accrue to them. Jones imagines the priest remembering individually or in groups all the people whom a medieval Welsh priest might remember, and thus, in a passage lasting seven pages (79-86), he recreates the cultural world of an educated person of British-Welsh and ecclesiastical background of the early Middle Ages. Among those recalled are “Athletes of God” (79), that is saints, especially the early Celtic saints, secular inhabitants of hills and valleys, inhabitants of monastic enclosures, poets, historical figures such as Cymbeline (“Cunobelinos the Radiant” 82), Roman and Greek pre-Christian authors, the early Christian writer and Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons, as well as the nameless who have inhabited the island of Britain. Jones urges the inclusiveness of the remembering by highlighting the words “FOR THESE ALL” (86) near the end of the prayer. He uses the word “anamnesis” during the prayer (79, 81), a word for remembering which is used in theological contexts to describe the way that the sacrament of the Eucharist makes the events of the Passion really present. So the prayer of remembrance in the poem is, once again, an analogy for Jones’ own activity. His poem also recalls all those connected with his geographical zone, the Island of Britain, whether named or unnamed, together with their works, and makes them once again really present, via anamnesis, and at the same time dedicates them and prays for them. The cultural memory he represents is not only embodied in the poem, but also made sacred.

David Jones’ theory and practice in relation to cultural memory is, this essay has argued, based on an inclusive understanding of the development of tradition, as well as on various aspects of sacramental thinking. These sets of ideas can be analysed from a Catholic, for example Thomist or neo-Thomist, point of view, but also with the help of insights from the phenomenological tradition. Jones sees the artist as being called to gather in the tradition of his or her locality as completely as possible, and to embody it in works. These works then consecrate the memory, in the sense of the re-presentation, of the makers of the tradition embodied in them. Thus Jones’ works are examples of cultural anamnesis, the making really present once again of the works of the past in a new work.

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