

NATURE IN MODERNITY: CAN IT SIGNIFY? – DAVID JONES AND NATURAL OBJECTS AS SIGNS

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Abstract: Since the Enlightenment nature has often been seen as a resource for exploitation rather than as an object of wonder. A combination of utilitarian modes of thought, the growth in the prestige of science and technology, and processes of industrialization, has favoured the tendency to view natural objects as part of a chain of utility, and to disregard other ways of understanding them. Other ways of understanding them would include the symbolic mode of understanding, the mode by which they are often understood when invoked in art works. During the early twentieth century a number of artists and writers, of whom David Jones was one, discussed the concept of 'the Break', a cultural break in the way natural objects have been regarded, such that at some point in modernity they have ceased to be understandable as symbols by the prevailing culture, with problematic consequences for the practice of the arts. Similar insights were discussed in the nineteenth century by writers such as Morris and Ruskin. Jones introduced to consideration of the problem a mode of theorising indebted to Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy. In this paper I shall discuss the background to Jones' preoccupation with the concept of 'the Break', how he understood the concept philosophically, and how he attempted to address, in his own artistic activity, and especially in his poetry, the problems he saw as resulting from 'the Break' for the practice of the arts.

The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the instrumentality of nature, rather than its wonder, brought about a new attitude to natural objects, an attitude, which, according to a group of writers and artists in early twentieth-century Britain, would obstruct its holder's ability to understand natural, as well as simple man-made, objects as symbolic, thus producing a lack of receptivity to the arts. David Jones, the Anglo-Welsh poet, artist and theorist, was one of this group. They called the change in attitudes they had identified 'the Break'. This paper will explore David Jones' understanding of this problem, both his analysis in his essayistic work, and his attempt to overcome the problem in his poetry – concentrating on three prose works, the essays "Art and Sacrament" and "The Utile," and the Preface to *The Anathemata*, and two poems, *The Anathemata* and "The Sleeping Lord." However, before focusing on these specific works by Jones, I shall introduce the background to the concept of 'the Break', as well as discussing the kind of philosophical framework which can be used, and is used by Jones, to describe the distinction between pre-'Break' and post-'Break' attitudes to natural objects.

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In the “Preface to *The Anathemata*” Jones talks of how “In the late nineteenth-twenties and early “thirties among my most immediate friends there used to be discussed something that we christened “The Break” (“Preface” 113). He specifies that “We did not discover the phenomenon so described; it had been evident in various ways to various people for perhaps a century; it is now, I suppose, apparent to most” (113). Jones was concerned that ordinary people in the modern era were losing the ability to regard natural, and simple man-made, objects as symbolic, and, in the poem “A, a, a, Domine Deus” (Jones, *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* 9), complains that the products of technological civilisation fail to hold symbolic value even for him. A writer of an overlapping period who shared Jones’ concern to restore his contemporaries capability both for wonder at nature and for appreciating the symbolism of simple objects was G. K. Chesterton, who, for example, in his essay “What I Found in my Pocket,” part of his collection of stories, *Tremendous Trifles* (74–8), describes how on a long train journey when he is alone, he is able to entertain himself by contemplating the symbolism of ordinary objects in his pockets, such as a penknife and matches, allowing them to evoke the wonder of important natural phenomena in the human environment, such as fire and metal, as well as to evoke elements of human civilisation. I shall return to examine how Jones analyses the phenomenon of “the Break” in the Preface of *The Anathemata* below, but the admission that the phenomenon was spotted earlier, at least in the nineteenth century, is supported by Colin Wilcockson, in his article “David Jones and “the Break””. He points out that William Morris talked of “this break in the continuity in the golden chain,” meaning something similar to Jones’ “the Break,” in an essay “The Beauty of Life” (Morris 182), and further notes that Jones is likely to have read this passage, so may have created the term “the Break” based on a memory of it (Wilcockson 130–1). In fact, apart from Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, many nineteenth-century reactions against utilitarianism, such as those of Ruskin,¹ Pugin, the Pre-Raphaelites and, later, the Aestheticists, could be seen as recognising, explicitly or implicitly, and attempting to counter, a change in the culture from the symbolic to the exploitative understanding of objects, of the kind described by Jones as “the Break.” Even early Romanticism might be interpreted as containing a protest against the enlightenment objectification of nature. Jones and many in his circle, however, did not base on a Romantic philosophical schema their reaction against what they saw as the deleterious effects of utilitarian culture on the possibilities for artistic communication, but rather turned to derivations of Aristotelian and medieval philosophy.

Jones, after his second, post-First-World-War period at art school, associated with a number of Catholic artists, such as Eric Gill, who were heavily influenced by the neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain.² The kind of Aristotelian and Thomist distinctions worked with by Maritain, and also Jones himself, have continued to be fruitful in later

¹ See Corcoran 3, 6 for the influence of Morris and Ruskin on Jones’s theoretical writing.

² For the influence of Maritain on Jones, see Dilworth ‘David Jones and the Maritain Conversation’, but for differences in Maritain’s and Jones’ approach, see Williams 83.

developments of this philosophical tradition by thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre. The key distinction in order to understand what was meant by “the Break” is that between beings and activities viewed as containing their own internal purpose, and beings and activities (or objects and techniques) viewed as having a purpose only outside themselves. In his essay “Art and Sacrament” Jones uses the traditional scholastic terminology when he distinguishes between intransitive and transitive activities, intransitive being those which contain their own purpose, and transitive being those only serving a purpose external to them (see Jones, “Art and Sacrament” 149). A given object may have transitive and intransitive aspects at the same time – for example an artistically produced tool. In Aristotle this distinction is behind such categorisations as liberal and non-liberal education (i.e. education for its own sake, and education for the purpose of enabling one to serve someone else and facilitate that person’s pursuit of liberal education). Also objects for Aristotle may have their own teleology, which gives them a self-contained purpose, while they may also be usable by others. MacIntyre develops his theory of human ethics with the help of Aristotelian-Thomist teleology. For him, an understanding of the human good is dependent on a teleological view of what a human being is. Different types of human activity can then be understood as practices with their own internal goods, which can nevertheless be subordinated to the human good generally. In MacIntyre’s scheme, or in the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition generally, a being’s or activity’s containing its own purpose does not mean that it has no purpose at all, or that it cannot be ordered within a higher framework of purpose. Thus artistic activities are pursued for their own sake, and contain their own goods, but pursuing them can also be part of the human good (see, for example, MacIntyre *After Virtue*). If this view is transferred to natural objects, the implication is that natural objects, while containing their own internal purposes, are not thereby gloriously purposeless, as a Romantic emphasis might make them, but can still be ordered to a higher purposefulness, such as a story of creation running at a supernatural level. Thus different natural objects, with their internal purposes, also have their places in a larger overall whole, and are capable of being (at least partially) understood, and of symbolising each other, or qualities they contain, or other objects or situations with which they share qualities. They also can also invoke the not wholly understood natural order of which they are part. Another contemporary theorist working at least partly in the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, the theologian Catherine Pickstock, stresses the importance of recognising the unknown depths contained in each object, and the extent to which it can be partially but not finally known. She believes that a post-Enlightenment belief that objects can be finally known robs the person who sees them in this way of his or her ability to understand them liturgically, that is, as inspiring gratitude (see Pickstock, *After Writing*).

So the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition allows Jones to reject the enlightenment-utilitarian approach to natural objects, which sees them as understandable through being measurable, and to be dealt with, if at all, as means to achieve human ends – he is enabled rather to regard natural objects as containing their own internal *raison d’être* while at the same time finding their place in a natural and supernatural order. Thus the human

approach to them may be, rather than to use them, to wonder at them, and to strive to understand their natures (partially rather than completely), as well as their place in a larger scheme. Their having a place in a larger scheme enables them to be signs of other beings and situations, with which they objectively share qualities.

Jones' essay, "Art and Sacrament," is an important statement of his theory of art, brought to prominence recently by the extensive discussion of it in Rowan Williams' study *Grace and Necessity*, in which he describes the essay as "one of the most important pieces of writing in the twentieth century on art and the sacred" (88). As mentioned above, Jones introduces the distinction between transitive and intransitive activities early in the essay, identifying art as an intransitive activity, one which contains its own purposes ("Art and Sacrament" 149). He acknowledges an overlap between his position and the aestheticist 'art for art's sake' position, although he cautions that the aestheticist 'art for art's sake' motto is easily interpreted in ways which would lead to false conclusions, such as that excellence in a work of art might justify it in the face of evil consequences caused by it (151). Jones identifies human beings as the only creatures capable of creating works of art, given that they are rational animals with a supernatural end (147) and are capable of activity meant to signify rather than to achieve a practical goal: creations of animals such as nests, honey-combs and spiders webs, involve skill, and are beautiful, but are made for practical external purposes, and not to signify anything, the animals who have made them not being capable of gratuitous signifying acts (149). He goes on, in this essay, to compare works of art to church sacraments, on the basis that they both signify, and make what they signify 'really present' in a different form (see, for example, Jones, "Art and Sacrament" 173-5). He finishes the essay by mentioning his fear that in modern conditions the potential audience for art works and sacraments is ever less able to interpret symbols, and he quotes a version of his poem "A, a, a, Domine Deus" to indicate how the products of modern industrial civilisation fail to act symbolically. The argument in this essay, though it does not focus on natural objects and how they can be understood as having symbolic value, can easily be extended in this direction: just as works of art have the potential to be understood symbolically, and are signs of something they re-present, objectively present in them, even if their audience is unable to discern their signifying quality, natural objects may have a symbolic potential, being capable of signifying other entities, and this potential of theirs may be used in work of arts and sacraments. However a population, trained in the thought patterns of utilitarian civilisation to see objects for how they can be used for external ends, may be unable to see them in terms of their non-usable, signifying qualities.

Jones supplemented "Art and Sacrament" with a short essay entitled "The Utile," which he wrote in order to explain his use of the term 'utile'. He distinguishes utile objects, which may happen to be beautiful, although they have been made for an external purpose, from utilitarian objects, which are human-made objects with no beauty, and thus sub-human (180-2). Utile objects can be human-made, or animal-made, whereas a utilitarian object must be an object which human-made object which lacks any hint of that gratuitousness (or intransitivity) which he believes ought to inhere in any human activity,

the capacity for it being a defining feature of the human according to Jones. So Jones here classifies animal-made objects as utile (but not utilitarian), but this is from the point of view of the animals (or other creatures) that make or produce them, since creatures other than human beings do not have the capacity for artistic activity, or to create objects with the intention of their having intransitive, or signifying, qualities. However, this point does not preclude the possibility of a natural, animal-made, for example, object, being interpreted symbolically by human beings accustomed to symbolic thinking – the kind of human beings in whom this kind of thinking has not been dulled, as Jones believes it would be, by living in a modern technological civilisation.

The Preface to *The Anathemata* addresses the question of the symbolic qualities of natural objects directly, and, as mentioned above, specifically names the phenomenon of “the Break,” and describes the circumstances of its being used as a term by Jones and his circle. Following on from his naming of the phenomenon, he explains how he and his friends believed that an understanding of sacramental culture was under threat from the utilitarian technological bias of the civilisation, and discusses the ways that a natural object, water, can be understood. He contrasts water as understood symbolically in a religious context, as the matter of the sacrament of baptism, and thus sign of the actions believed to take place when the sacrament is performed, on the one hand, with, on the other, water understood in technological civilisation as hydrogen dioxide (see Jones, “The Preface to *The Anathemata*” 114). In Jones’ view, the scientific understanding of the analysis of the water molecule into atoms need not imply, in itself, a loss of the symbolic potential of water, and he argues that an earlier, less utilitarian, culture, would have been capable of using such a scientific insight in order to see further symbolic possibilities in water (114). So it is not scientific discovery that works against the understandability of a natural object such as water in a symbolic fashion, but rather the utilitarian orientation of the civilisation, which encourages the viewing of natural objects only in terms of their exploitability in technologies.

Jones goes on to specify that he does not feel able to speculate on the exact causes of the “lesion of some sort” (Jones, “The Preface to *The Anathemata*” 115) which he has named “the Break,” or on the whether it is a permanent or temporary phenomenon, but he is concerned with the effects of “the Break” on the practice of creating a work of art, specifically of poetry, that is, the long poem *The Anathemata*, which follows the Preface: as he expresses it, he is “concerned with the present effects of these phenomena only in so far as those effects impinge upon, raise problems relative to, inconvenience or impoverish, handicap the free use of, modify the possibilities of, or in any way affect the *materia poetica*” (115). Jones is keen to counter the suggestion, which might arise, to the effect that only those with theological interests or leanings are affected by the utilitarian and anti-sign-making turn in the culture (115). He argues that poetry is of its nature an anamnesis of something loved, that is, a recalling of cultural deposits that have formed the poet and the poets cultural medium (118) – and he gives as an example of this poetic recalling the dog-rose as a symbol of England, which recalls associations of the experience of being in England in the summer in someone who has been there, in a way

that propagandist symbols, such as flags, do not (118). He worries that a loss in awareness of cultural deposits among a population can make it less able to detect symbolic associations which previous generations could detect in objects, including natural objects: he gives, as an example, wood, which he is concerned that an audience of his time for poetry might not be capable of associating with the Cross (120). If the poet's audience cannot make such associations, the poet faces a practical difficulty in writing poetry which will recall cultural deposits for the audience of his or her time, thus in writing poetry which does what poetry has to do to be poetry, in Jones' understanding.

The Anathemata is an attempt by Jones to put into practice the theory of poetry and art expounded in its preface, and nature objects play an important role in the poem, most obviously in the first section of seven, entitled "Rite and Fore-time." *The Anathemata* is a collection of poetic passages about the history and culture of the Island of Britain, many of the passages united by the loose theme of a ship sailing to Britain from the Mediterranean during antiquity, arriving at the Port of London (the sections when the ship is in Britain seeming to represent later historical periods), and then returning to the Mediterranean. Two sections which connect British culture particularly strongly with parts of the Christian liturgical year (Christmas and Easter-time) conclude the poem. "Rite and Fore-time," the opening section, sets the scene for the historical sections by introducing prehistory – and is particularly rich in its evocation of natural objects. Apart from archaeology, it also concentrates on geology, describing the formation of the landmasses that became Britain and Europe. While the section starts with a portrayal of a priest celebrating a mass, at the part just before the consecration, thus framing the whole poem in the context of the place of history within a supernatural narrative, copious specific geological references are woven into the body of the section, such as the Aristotelian "Great Summer" and "Great Winter" (Jones, *The Anathemata* 55), the formation of hills and mountains ("oreogenesis" 53), the Ice Age (e.g. Jones, *The Anathemata* 59), and the formation and history of rivers (e.g. the Danube, Jones *The Anathemata* 59, or the Thames when it still flowed into the Rhine, Jones *The Anathemata* 64). Despite the strong emphasis on the forces of nature, and the geological formation of Britain, and of Europe, in this section, the natural phenomena are not presented in scientific baldness, or with reference to how they might be exploited, but tied to their human and cultural associations. So, for example, the hills, as well as being the result of geological forces, might be associated with Arthur ("*colles Arthuri*," Jones *The Anathemata* 55), with Troy ("Little Hissarlik/ least of acclivities," Jones *The Anathemata* 56), or even the hill Noah's Ark settled on – although he does not name a definite location ("Where's Ark-Hill?" Jones *The Anathemata* 55). As well as the explicit cultural associations, there are implied cultural meanings associated with the natural objects mentioned: for example, writing of the Thames as a tributary of the Rhine before Britain became an island is likely to represent the status of British culture as a component of Western European culture, an important theme for Jones. So natural objects in *The Anathemata* play a crucial role in the cosmic picture Jones presents, since they are the ground on which human culture grows, invested by human culture with meanings

throughout its history. These historical cultural associations are integral to how humans relate to natural objects as part of the pre-utilitarian relationship with them, Jones argues in his essays, and implies in *The Anathemata*.

Another, shorter, poem of Jones, “The Sleeping Lord,” published as part of the collection *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*, is closely concerned with nature, again especially with the landscape, and its geological substrata. The poem is initially concerned with the idea of heroes sleeping in caves in the landscape. He is inspired by a burial site found in South Wales, in the Gower Peninsula, dating from a period before Britain became an island (see Jones, *The Sleeping Lord* 71 note 2), but he associates this find with the multitudinous legends of buried heroes and gods, some of whom may be expected to come again – as in the case of Arthur. This theme is in fact one of Jones’ favourite themes, and it is a motif also capable of being seen as prefiguring the Christian Resurrection. After a middle section, which shows a priest saying mass in a medieval Welsh court, the poem’s final section starts with the hunt for the Boar Trwyth, another favourite motif for Jones. Trwyth is a giant boar in Welsh legend, which roams the land, devastating it as it goes. In a complex layering of meaning, Jones describes the damage the boar does to the various types of trees growing in a Welsh landscape, naming them in Welsh, Latin and English,³ but then associates the leader of the hunt with the Sleeping Lord of the beginning of the poem, that is, the burial in the cave. At the same time the devastation of the Boar Trwyth turns into the devastation caused by industry on the South Welsh landscape (e.g. “black-rimed Rhymni/ soils her Marcher banks,” Jones *The Sleeping Lord* 92; “does grimed Ogwr toss on a foul ripple,” Jones *The Sleeping Lord* 92); through this passage on industrial devastation, a pre-concluding passage which imagines a medieval English-occupied castle on the Welsh border, and a concluding passage focusing on the Sleeping Lord himself, it is implied that the land actually is the Sleeping Lord, injured by the Boar Trwyth and by industrialisation (“is the wasted land/ that very lord who sleeps,” Jones *The Sleeping Lord* 96). So in this poem Jones uses the landscape to signify cultural history, as well as to signify the damage done to it by attitudes which fail to recognise its capacity to bear cultural significance, and treat it only as an exploitable material resource.

In this paper I have attempted to show how David Jones, in the company of many other thinkers and artists of his time, perceived a cultural change in the demise of the popular ability to see objects, including natural objects, as signifying rather than exploitable. I have discussed how he explained this change in theoretical terms, and how he sought to maintain the signifying character of natural objects in his own poetic works. What emerges is that, in Jones’ view, as he theorises from a broadly Thomistic perspective, humans must invest natural (and artistic) objects with cultural significance if they are to be true to their nature as humans, the only creatures capable of an intransitive attitude to other objects. Thus a utilitarian approach to natural objects de-natures the

³ See Dilworth *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones* 336 for the Boar Trwyth motif here, and how the Boar’s activity symbolises the loss of the forests of South Wales.

humans who espouse it, as well as leading to the damaging of exploited nature. Jones maintains that his theory may be understandable even to those not basing this understanding on a religious foundation. The cultural meanings which natural objects can bear, due to their role in human history, are objective, even if particular humans cannot recognise them. However his approach may be read as implying, although he does not pursue this line of reasoning, that a further inherent level of meaning may attach to natural objects, which is the level of meaning they gain from their place in a supernatural scheme, a scheme always acknowledged in Jones' poetic work – this level of meaning would inhere in natural objects independently of human activity.

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