

DAVID JONES ON ART AND RELIGION

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

TO start on a personal note, let me say that while I see that the visual art of Mr David Jones is a joy for ever, I cannot read the *Anathemata*. Mindful however of the magical beauty of those pictures, I am ready to spring to attention as soon as Mr Jones starts discoursing in prose; and so, for the purpose of commenting on this collection of his occasional papers and essays,¹ the trouble I have with his other, 'creative' writings does not perhaps matter. It is partly no doubt a question of the sort of poetry one is predisposed to admire; and in my own case a mainly 'Mediterranean' training, and in particular the example of Dante, make a certain degree of *visible* order and outline in large-scale poetry a necessity for me. But our present business is with this rich miscellany of reflective prose, and here I find no difficulty at all in taking Mr Jones as a sort of Virgil-guide, a *dolce maestro*—in this case a Christian one—through a world he knows so well, the obscure but enchanting regions explored in this book.

I must, however, qualify the above with respect to the Welsh and Early British (if that is the right expression) matter contained here (Sections I and III), for on all this I am too ignorant to be even a good pupil. The strings of Welsh names mean nothing to me. Only when Latin words pierce the gloom, the Christian Latin of the early Church, or when, as often happens, the voice of Chaucer is heard, do I begin to feel at home. But this again hardly matters. In some of these papers, e.g. the long one on 'The Myth of Arthur', Mr Jones invites the judgment of scholars on his accuracy in detail; but it would be absurdly irrelevant to judge him by that criterion. He is a poet with a passion for history; and the question that this raises is not whether he is well enough informed historically—there can be no doubt anyhow, for all his disarming modesty, of his wide and deep reading—but rather *why* he is so attached to history and just how this passionate attachment is of the essence—as it certainly is—of his peculiar vision.

1 *Epoch and Artist*. By David Jones. (Faber; 25s.)

As a rough *schema*, to help us here, I suggest that every artist is concerned, in varying degrees, with these three *data*: subhuman nature, the human world, and the divine world—meaning by this last so much light about God as a particular artist or poet may come to be aware of, either as a man simply or as a believer in revelation. And it is worth insisting that for the Christian poet too that light from God is filtered through signs and *media*; his advantage over his non-believing brother being not, of course, that he sees God directly, unmediated by signs (Dante only pretended to do this, at the end of the *Paradiso*) but that his vision is enriched by the supremely valid sign of Christ's humanity and by the sacraments which, so to say, articulate this sign to mankind and which, in the act of doing so, encounter, make use of, confirm and complete the natural sign-world of human art—together with all the natural things that must be taken into art, and with the crafts that effected this intaking for thousands of years (but only exceptionally do so now—a fact which Mr Jones, we shall see, is much concerned about).

To the connection between human art and religion, *homo faber* and Christianity, Mr Jones returns again and again. It is indeed the chief theme and contention of this book. 'The Christian religion', he writes, 'is committed to Ars in the most explicit, compelling and integral manner.' This commitment appears most vividly in the Last Supper: 'If in the Cenacle forms of words were used and manual acts employed involving material substances these things can have been done only in virtue of the doer being a man along with us . . . man-the-artist along with us. What was done would have been neither necessary nor possible unless man is man-the-artist.' The 'is' takes a full stress; it means 'is essentially'; and through many pages the point is elaborated, meditatively, discursively, that the artist-nature of man has been recognized and sanctioned by 'the Logos, the Artifex' incarnate. This point is indeed vital to David Jones—in the first place because he is himself an artist through and through; and then, because in all his art he has been radically and intensely—and yet, in his manner, how delicately and even humorously—concerned with Man; I mean, with historical man, man *in concreto* and in time. His art is all a resuming of history. His vision of the 'for ever' is slanted through the past. And then, thirdly, that point is vital because he is acutely, anxiously, aware that the present time-phase is

running steadily *away* from man the artist, as he understands the expression. I will not repeat his arguments on this matter here, but only note in passing that his anxiety about the current de-personalization of human making, the overwhelming drift, in respect of that which is made, towards what he calls the 'utile', that this anxiety is not in the least sentimental. In one sense it has nothing to do with Mr Jones's attachment to the past. It springs straight out of a deep understanding—from-within of the nature of happy human making—whether the thing made be a cake or a cathedral—and indeed of the basic nature of man. It is at this level, if anywhere, that an adversary would have to meet him. For himself, he is sure that man and artist are interchangeable terms: 'We were *homo faber, homo sapiens* before Lascaux (the cave paintings) and we shall be *homo faber, homo sapiens* after the last atomic bomb has fallen'. This conviction recalls the saying that Eric Gill used to hammer into our heads: 'An artist is not a special sort of man, but every man is a special sort of artist'; though one notes that Mr Jones is less inclined than the more combative Gill was to over-simplify the issue; indeed, he does not over-simplify at all. Nor has he Gill's polemical bias against the 'Fine Arts' with their snobbish associations; when Mr Jones says 'all men are artists', he is not attacking anyone (and, for that matter, Gill was much gentler in conversation than in print).

Very notable is his refusal to separate art from religion: 'By a sort of paradox man can act gratuitously only because he is dedicated to the gods. When he falls from dedication he again acts like an animal—the utile is all he knows and his works take on something of the nature of the work of the termites.' I shall return to that interesting word 'gratuitously'; for the moment, note the virtual identification of art with offering, dedicating, sacrificing. It is not an obvious identity for most people today. Perhaps to recognize that all art is implicitly religious, you need *already* to have some religion, as well as some sense of what art is about. Mr Jones, anyhow, is deeply convinced of it: 'Art knows only a sacred activity'; and he calls its products *anathemata*, i.e. 'things set apart', 'offerings'. And in the central didactic chapters of this book, the hundred pages of Section II, he wrestles with the difficulty of getting this intuition across, of explaining why art, the making of 'signs', is always implicitly 'sacred'—sacred, of course precisely as that sort of activity and not in the *moral* sense

of the term such as would imply the virtue of religion. And this struggle for clarity seems to me on the whole brilliantly successful; only you must not expect from Mr Jones what he never intended to provide, an exhaustive analysis. He does not analyse 'sign' as a logician would, and if the term may cover other meanings than his own, he expects the reader to allow for this *ambulando* and to have enough wit and imagination to seize the meaning that *he* is giving it. This granted, the attentive reader should experience no great difficulty in the argument, but rather, as he reads on, something like that 'peculiar lightness of the heart' with which Mr Jones, as he tells us, took the train back to London after his first long conversation with Eric Gill. Certainly the manner of his writing, its rambling 'sweet disorder', its frolicsome imagery, has a heart-lightening quality; for the images do not merely frolic, they really aid intelligence. They carry the argument forward; especially when (as on pp. 159-61 and 173-5) the examples chosen seem at first sight to play into the enemy's hands, but cunningly serve in fact to anticipate objections and so to stimulate thought to further efforts. Mr Jones's imagination is always threaded by thought and meaning. His fertility with fresh imagery, as well as his easy colloquialism, sometimes remind one of D. H. Lawrence, but he is far more logical and coherent than Lawrence.

If we could catch the beaver placing never so small a twig *gratuitously* we could make his dam into a font, he would be patient of baptism—the whole sign-world would be open to him'; he would, in short, be human. Here is that tricky term 'gratuitous' again; and it recurs, later, in the most systematic of these essays, 'Art and Sacrament' (1955), along with another important term, 'intransitivity'. Neither of these words is closely defined. They are used as pointers to the specific nature of human art-making as distinct from what animals (and machines) do when they construct things. What Mr Jones has in mind, evidently, is (a) something wilful, free, undetermined, in every human art-act, and (b) a moment, however fleeting, of rational appreciation or contemplation in the same. Each art-act, then, is 'intransitive' in the degree that a maker dwells on the *form*—or, as Mr Jones puts it, the 'perfect fit'—intrinsic to the thing he is making; without regard, for the moment, to the *use* to which the completed thing will be put. When wilfulness ('gratuitousness') and form-appre-

ciation are quite lacking, then the action swings straight through to its product, with no spiritual halt on the way, and you have the merely 'utile'—the products of animals or machines. And it is just at or in that 'halt' that there occurs the reference, implicit or explicit, to a *signatum*, that the artefact receives the character of a 'sign', and so that natural 'sacredness' appertaining to the human spirit's re-presentation of what Claudel called 'la sainte réalité'.

Perhaps this will seem a high-faluting way to speak about much of what passes for art; but let us turn—since I must be brief—to Mr Jones's own practice as painter and poet. Here, at any rate, art is drawn into an explicit contact with religion, and at a profound level of interest and concern. I have said: 'his vision is slanted through the past', and I meant that his special gift is to see time, human historical time, as pregnant with signs; and to see this and represent it from the strictly particularly view-point of a man conditioned by a particular time and place, and then reflecting, looking back, and gathering everything in—as Joyce looked back at his Ireland, but in a different spirit. What the Welshman David Jones 'gathers', his matter, is 'the Western Christian *res*' with its natural terrain and its foreshadowings in pagan myth and ritual. His past is full of signs. That particular tract of human time, of history, is the *datum* of and from which he lifts up the 'valid sign' of his art; which is therefore a recalling *anamnesis* (Mnemosyne being the mother of the Muses). But this 'valid sign', that holds the past into the present, is itself, he finds, only the sign of a Sign. His art, he finds, is less than, if analogous to, that reality of which it was said that *res et sacramentum est in ipsa materia*:² the Sign which was given in time and recurs in time, but which, effecting what it signifies, makes present the eternal Artifex of time. So in the Cenacle and the Mass art finds its perfect Exemplar—the Exemplar which, in one sense, has made an end of human art,

Dat panis coelicus figuris terminum,

but which, in another sense, being itself a visible sign, remains a perpetually fresh starting point for Christian 'makers'.

It is to such considerations that Mr Jones's book quite naturally leads. If I omit other matters that he touches upon (and all that he touches seems to spring to life and light) it was in order to focus on the central issue.

² *Summa Theologiae* III, 73, 1 ad 1.