

# The Quest for Melchisedek

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*Introibo ad altare Dei*—these words from Psalm 42 can induce a stiffening, even a shudder, among Catholics of traditional formation, and so I at once assure my audience that they begin my paper not, or not directly, because of their place at the beginning of one of the rites of Mass that we knew before the Council, but because of their appearance in the opening paragraph of James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing-gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

— *Introibo ad altare Dei.*

Halted he peered down the dark, winding stairs and called up coarsely:

— Come up, Kinch. Come up, you fearful jesuit.

Solemnly he came forward and mounted the round gunrest.

He faced about and blessed gravely thrice the tower, the surrounding country and the awakening mountains.

This is liturgical parody, but the scene also has more disturbing overtones. The cliffs of Dun Laoghaire are soon likened to the cliff of Elsinore where Hamlet was set at enmity with his mother. Mulligan's companion, Stephen Dedalus, joins him on the parapet wearing black in mourning for his mother and troubled by the memory of how he hurt her by his refusal to join in the prayers at her deathbed. Mulligan compares him to Hamlet and interprets his nickname, Kinch, as meaning 'the knife-blade'. So the lifting of the razor and the presbyteral words and gestures are more than parody—they hint at matricide. Moreover, as Stephen and Mulligan stand at the shore they long to free themselves from Mother Ireland.

Much of the significance of this episode was lost on me until I visited the Martello tower at Dun Laoghaire where it is set and stood on the parapet like Buck Mulligan, looking eastwards over the sea. I had come from England, but as I stood there I realised I was looking not merely towards England but beyond, towards Europe—Paris, Zurich, Trieste, the cities of mixed culture where *Ulysses* was written, and beyond them towards Greece, whither Mulligan and Stephen's thoughts are soon drawn.

In such a context the blade held aloft by the seashore cannot but recall another seaside sacrifice, that made of Iphigenia at Aulis by her father Agamemnon to win a favourable wind, that the Greek fleet might sail for Troy and the frontier be crossed between Europe and Asia. Frontiers, boundaries, barriers are places of sacrifice, offered that the boundary may be passed. The one who offers sacrifice is one who stands at boundaries, sharing in the exclusion, marginalisation, rejection that are the lot of the victim. Stephen stands, isolated though in company, between Ireland and Europe. The greatest divide of all is that separating the human and the divine, the barrier through which sacrifice breaks, of which other barriers are signs.

When I was asked for a paper on 'Priesthood and Literature' the request was added, which surprised me, that I should not restrict myself to the discussion of Trollope. I shall in fact be little concerned with clergymen. My aim is rather to consider how certain writers use imaginative literature to explore what priesthood—not simply ministerial priesthood, not simply Christian priesthood—might be, to fashion fresh images of priesthood.

The boundary at which the Jewish High Priest stood and through which he passed was the veil of the presence. In early days this had been outside the camp, but in the Temple in Jesus' time it was in the middle of the city, at the centre of a nexus of economic, political and social relationships which aroused Jesus' prophetic criticism. According to the Letter to the Hebrews Jesus, when entering into the Holy Place (9, 12) did so 'outside the camp' (13, 12)—he became marginal, and in doing so he passed 'into the heavens'.

Not all clergymen are men of the margin. Some of us are more inclined to the view of Browning's Bishop Blougram:

Bid Peter's creed, or rather, Hildebrand's,  
Exalt me o'er my fellows in the world  
And make my life an ease and joy and pride;  
It does so, —which for me's a great point gained,  
Who have a soul and body that exact  
A comfortable care in many ways.

Satire against worldly prelates forms a large proportion of the literature concerned with the clergy. Much rarer is literature that portrays the tension clergy can feel between the material and social security conferred by their state and the call to live on the margin, between the individual's sense of what he ought to do and what is expected of him by social conventions. I find this well expressed in Richard Adams' novel *Shardik*, whose central character is effectively imprisoned in the centre of a city of which he is both priest and king:

... he himself knew that his priesthood, which seemed to others incapable of further magnification and therefore

essentially procedural and unchanging in its nature, a matter of service and rites performed in due season, was in reality an all-demanding search, during which time was always passing and his steps never covered the same ground twice.

A sense that the exercise of a priestly role is suffocated by the patterns of life that surround the clergy leads some writers to look elsewhere for authentic priesthood. Newman provides an example in *Loss and Gain*, whose hero, Charles Reding, leaving Anglican Oxford by train, meets a Catholic priest whose very attire has a foreign aspect. They discuss Catholicism, a crucial conversation for Reding, but as soon as they reach Paddington the priest leaves him and is seen no more. We know nothing of his thoughts: he appears from nowhere and vanishes to nowhere. He is like Melchisedek, 'without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life' (Heb 7, 3). He has no place in the familiar structures of society.

Reding soon has another such encounter, when his reception into the Church is attended by a friend from earlier days, formerly known as Willis, but now rejoicing in the title of Father Aloysius de Sancta Cruce:

'What a joy, Reding!' he said ... 'My superior let me be present; but now I must go. You did not see me, but I was present through the whole ... But I must away ... Whether we shall meet again here below, who knows? ... Reding took Father Aloysius's hand, and kissed it; as he sank on his knees, the young priest made the sign of blessing over him. Then he vanished through the door of the sacristy.'

Another Melchisedek. Newman wrote *Loss and Gain* soon after his conversion. These idealised portraits of the Catholic clergy are perhaps influenced by Dominic Barberi. Newman was soon to learn that the church he had joined was also the church of Bishop Blougram.



The tendency to look outside society for a fresh image of priesthood is abundantly evidenced in the Middle Ages, when ecclesial ministry, particularly at the higher levels, was closely linked with secular power. The huge body of literature concerned with the Grail shows knights leaving the known world of civilisation, of the court with its bishops, chaplains and rituals, to quest through trackless forests in search of the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper. Unexpectedly they come upon priests or bishops celebrating Mass, or meet hermits who offer spiritual instruction. The quest requires innocence in those who attempt it. Percival, who comes close to the Grail, has no connection with the court at all, having been born in the forest. Galahad, the purest knight of all, performs a quasi-presbyteral rite in anointing a sick king with the blood of Christ. The Grail

itself is probably in origin a pre-Christian Celtic symbol, and the whole quest reveals a need to escape from civilisation, to rediscover the primitive, the innocent, in order to achieve enhanced religious awareness.

From the Middle Ages also comes William Langland's dream-vision *Piers Plowman*, the greatest religious poem in English in the Catholic tradition. Much of it is occupied by complaint against the corruption of society in Langland's day, in particular the greed, sloth and hypocrisy of the clergy. The central character, Piers Plowman himself, embodies the ideals the clergy so conspicuously fail to live up to. An honest labourer, a friend of God, he is better able than most priests to guide men towards truth. As the vision develops, his Christ-like qualities are brought out more and more until he becomes difficult to distinguish from Christ. He whose ordinary work of ploughing contributed to the production of bread is given presbyteral power to make 'bread blessed and God's body thereunder'. The seed he sows is now the Gospel, his field the whole world.

Thus the ploughman has become priest, without ceasing to be a ploughman. Piers is in one sense an idealised figure, the honest workman, but in another sense he is Everyman, with every man's natural knowledge of God, natural possession of the divine image, and supernatural capacity for divinisation. The pastoral ministry is at the service of the union of the human and divine begun in Christ and continued through grace in the Church. Only one who is a true locus of this union can, in Langland's vision, effectively exercise this ministry: only insofar as the barrier between human and divine is dissolved in us can we help others to overcome that division.

There are not many clergymen like Piers Plowman. Indeed, the conclusion of the poem implies that there are none, that he represents an ideal never attained except by Christ. The final scene depicts the corrupt contemporary Church, with Piers nowhere to be seen. In the general confusion a 'lewd vicar' (Middle English for an uneducated curate) declares that he wishes to see no cardinals but Grace, Conscience, and Piers Plowman with his new plough and his old as emperor of all the world. The Pope is imperfect, because he pays people to kill those he should save, while Piers tills as much for layabouts and prostitutes as for himself and his servants. The vicar of Christ should be Christ-like: Piers would be the ideal Pope.

But Piers does not return: he is a man of the margins, a Melchisedek, having no established place in society. The vision ends with the personification of Conscience walking away from the chaos of a corrupt church, crying out for Grace and searching for Piers Plowman. That moment can summarise much of the history of priesthood in literature.

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A writer we cannot neglect if we wish to be in possession of the English Catholic tradition in literature or painting is David Jones. He was perhaps the last of the poets of the First World War to bring his writing to birth. *In Parenthesis*, based on his war experience, was not written until the 1930s, and not published until 1937. He had had two periods of service, the first from December 1915 to July 1916, when he was wounded in Mametz Wood, the second when he came back to the front after his recovery. On his return he found that the War had 'hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair' and taken on 'a more sinister aspect', lacking the sense of comradeship he had valued in the earlier days.

It is with this earlier period that *In Parenthesis* is concerned. The first six sections deal with the journey from England through France to the front of a battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Most of the action is seen through the eyes of Private John Ball, a disorganised character who makes his first appearance late on parade and improperly dressed. Around him unfolds the liturgy of army life.

In calling military ceremony a 'liturgy', as he does more than once, Jones is not only being faithful to the etymology of the word, but also expressing a respect for the soldier's profession that had been nurtured in him by many sources. The Song of Roland was one. Another, and more important, was his knowledge of ancient Roman literature, history and archaeology. It was significant to him, for instance, that the Roman military oath was a religious as well as a civil contract whose Latin name, *sacramentum*, has given us a key term in christian theology. The old Welsh Arthurian legends also served to dignify soldiery in his eyes, particularly since he himself had Welsh blood and his battalion contained many Welshmen. He wrote that when they set out for the front, he and his companions felt that they were stepping into history.

Not that the liturgy of military life was easy for Jones to fit into, or that John Ball's journey to the front in *In Parenthesis* is all. Much of it is chaos, in which the common soldier has no idea where he is going or what he is supposed to be doing. But within the narrative there are frequent hints of a larger pattern that will give sense and shape to this disorder. As the battalion travels by train through France, allusions to the liturgy imply that they are in some way participating in the paschal mystery:

Toward evening on the same day they entrained in cattle trucks; and on the third day, which was a Sunday, sunny and cold, and French women in deep black were hurrying across flat land—they descended from their grimy, littered, limb restricting, slatted vehicles, and stretched and shivered at a siding. You feel exposed and apprehensive in this new world. The cattle truck is likened to a sepulchre, the three days' darkness and confinement, ending on a Sunday, to the entombment of Christ, and although there is irony in comparing a cold French railway siding with

the garden of the Resurrection—this new world is not one to which they had wished to travel—there is also the implication that, if anything can make sense of the First World War, Easter can.

Jones uses reference to the liturgy, then, not to glorify war, but to set it in a larger, redemptive, context. In this he contrasts with Wilfred Owen, whose allusions to liturgy are ironical, denying that religious ritual can offer any comfort or lessening of the horror of war. Benjamin Britten was faithful to Owen's mood when in the *War Requiem* he mingled his poems with texts from the Requiem Mass. Anybody who chose to use David Jones in a similar way would surely interleave his words with the liturgy of the Paschal Triduum.

Jones does this himself when he begins the third section of *In Parenthesis*, which narrates the battalion's night-march towards the front, with rubrics from the liturgy of Good Friday. The silence, the absence of lights, the pared-down character of the formalities, and an atmosphere of foreboding, are common to the march and to the liturgy, but what is not implied is any comparison between death in war and the sacrifice of Christ. Rather, as the march begins, we learn of John Ball's hope:

For John Ball there was in this night's parading, for all the fear in it, a kind of blessedness, here was borne away with yesterday's remoteness, an accumulated tedium, all they'd piled on since enlistment day: a whole unlovely order this night would transubstantiate, lend some grace to.

As the troops advance towards death the theological vocabulary of grace and transubstantiation expresses a hope beyond what is immediately experienced, a paschal hope which sees beyond Good Friday to Easter Day, as the reference to the 'blessedness' of 'this night' recalls the *O beata nox* of the *Exultet*. Although Jones was to criticise the revision of the Holy Week liturgy in the 1950s and the more sweeping changes of the 1960s, he here shows a sympathy, born of his reading in liturgical scholarship and early Christian literature, with one of their underlying principles, seeing the liturgy of Good Friday not as a requiem for Jesus, but as a celebration with a strong note of hope and even of triumph.

The climax of *In Parenthesis*, which brings a certain fulfilment of John Ball's hope, comes when the line that divides the German army from the British, the front to which the whole journey of the book up to the final section has moved, is dissolved. John Ball finds himself crawling wounded through Mametz Wood, which is littered with the corpses of both German and British troops. On and around the bodies lie branches, foliage and flowers severed by flying ammunition. The soldiers are seen as garlanded heroes:

The secret princes between the leaning trees have diadems  
given them ...

The Queen of the Woods has cut bright boughs of various flowering.

These knew her influential eyes. Her awarding hands can pluck for each their fragile prize.

She speaks to them according to precedence. She knows what's due to this elect society. She can choose twelve gentlemen. She knows who is most lord between the high trees and on the open down.

Some she gives white berries  
some she gives brown

Emil has a curious crown it's  
made of golden saxifrage.

Fatty wears sweet briar,  
he will reign with her for a thousand years.

For Balder she reaches high to fetch his ...

Hansel with Gronwy share dog-violets for a palm,  
where they lie in serious embrace beneath the twisted tripod.

The Queen of the Woods is a mysterious figure, recalling Proserpine, from whose tree Aeneas had to pluck the Golden Bough as a gift for her before he descended into the underworld, and Diana of the grove at Nemi, whose priest-king had to lop a sacred bough and slay his predecessor before succeeding. The severed branches call to mind also Saint Boniface, the English apostle of Germany, who plucked a bough from a sacred saxon grove before his martyrdom. The Queen of the Woods' role is a priestly, reconciling one, for in her realm the divisions between Britain and Germany are overcome. English, Welsh and German names are mingled, with an allusion to Germanic mythology (Balder) and an echo of Milton's diction (influential eyes ... prize; cf. Ladies, whose Bright eyes / rain influence, and judge the prize, *L'Allegro*). The tripod is an object sacred to Apollo. The twelve soldiers suggest the twelve apostles or the twelve tribes of Israel and the thousand years the reign of the martyrs after the binding of Satan in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation. The names Hansel and Gronwy echo the Germanic children's tale *Hansel and Gretel*.

Thus the dead of both armies are united by the reconciling embrace of the Queen of the Woods in lines where allusions to the literature of each side are mingled with allusions to the common culture of both. In this climactic apocalypse the barrier between Britain and Germany is transcended.

The texture of Jones' verse and of his vision begins to loosen as he comes towards the end of *In Parenthesis*. The concrete evocative power of his descriptive writing gives way to a more allusive and complex mode. The range of his allusions is growing wider as he gropes towards understanding a wider range of human experience than that whose



boundary is the West Front. Anybody who knows his paintings will recognise a similar development there, from bold and simple representational work to the enormously complex later work such as *Vexilla Regis*.

While much of his framework of reference is liturgical, it is not distinctively presbyteral. Jones learnt his Catholicism, after his reception into the Church by Fr O'Connor at Bradford in 1921, in the communities founded by Eric Gill at Ditchling and Capel-y-ffyn, among the most impressive and fruitful lay Catholic movements of our century. Gill and his companions, who were Dominican Tertiaries, regularly celebrated the Liturgy of the Hours (to which *In Parenthesis* contains allusions), and so Jones had an unusually rich lay experience of the liturgy. The presbyterate comes more to the fore in his later work.

During his war-service, while searching for firewood, Jones had stumbled on a tumbledown farm-building where Mass was in progress. He was deeply impressed, and was particularly struck by the fact that Mass was being said so close to the front line. Frontiers are a recurrent theme in Jones' work. As a man he was never able to provide for himself the security he needed, with the result that others had to provide it for him, which is understandable in one whose life had been shattered by war. For him a boundary, an enclosure, is a sign of civilisation. The front in the Great War had been the boundary between two societies, overcome in the final vision of *In Parenthesis* in a wider embrace.

Several of his shorter poems are set on the boundary of the Roman Empire, in Jerusalem, at the time of Christ's passion. These Jerusalem poems, *The Dream of Private Clitus*, *The Fatigue* and *The Tribune's Visitation*, all explore the involvement with Christ's death of sentries posted to guard the frontier, or *limes*, to give it its Latin name which Jones was fond of using. The making of boundaries was in a sense what the extension of Roman rule was all about, not simply the *limes* of the whole Empire, but of camps, settlements and cities. Jones was fascinated by the ancient Roman ritual for marking out the site of a new settlement, a religious rite which involved the augurs as well as surveyors and engineers.

Jones' second long work, *The Anathemata*, begins with a presbyter celebrating Mass:

We already and first of all discern him making this thing  
other. His groping syntax, if we attend, already shapes:

ADSCRIPTAM, RATAM, RATIONABILEM ...

and by preapplication and for *them*, under modes  
and patterns altogether theirs, the holy and  
venerable hands lift up the efficacious sign..

and we soon discover that he is standing at a boundary:

The utile infiltration nowhere held



creeps vestibule  
is already at the closed lattices, is coming through  
each door.

*Utile* is a key term in Jones' work, denoting objects that are made with a view to mere utility, things more useful than beautiful. The making of things that are both useful and beautiful he saw as the distinctive activity of man, threatened in his day by declining standards of craftsmanship and the growth of mass-production. We have noticed how he regretted the increasingly mechanical quality of life during the Great War. Now he sees the life of the Church threatened in the same way as the worshippers stand in a setting of tawdry ecclesiastical furniture:

between the sterile ornaments  
under the pasteboard baldachins  
as, in the young-time, in the sap-years:  
between the living floriations  
under the leaping arches.

The 'living floriations' may recall to us the arching trees of Mametz Wood and the wide religious sympathies of that closing section of *In Parenthesis*, for in *The Anathemata* Jones sets the Mass not only in the context of earlier Christianity, the ages of the 'leaping arches' of Gothic architecture, but in the context of all religious experience and activity, and indeed of all human experience and activity. The image evoked of worship offered in a forest reaches right back into pre-history. The title of the first section of *The Anathemata* is appropriately 'Rite and Fore-Time'.

The idea at the centre of *The Anathemata* is that all distinctively human activity find a focus in the Cross of Christ and in the Eucharist. By distinctively human activity Jones understands the making of signs of whatever kind, *the reshaping of the raw material of creation in ways that make meaning for men*. He was intoxicated by the theology of Maurice de la Taille SJ (despite the warnings of Fr Vincent McNabb), according to which Christ on the Cross 'placed himself in the order of signs', gave meaning to himself. At the Last Supper he had done the same with bread and wine, and on both occasions he was participating in the same process as the cave-painters of Lascaux, who were among the first beings known to have made matter meaningful.

The presbyter appears as craftsman at the beginning of *The Anathemata*, accommodating matter to human minds. Our modern version hardly renders the sense of the words ADSCRIPTAM, RATAM, RATIONABILEM from the Roman Canon:

Bless and approve our offering;  
make it acceptable to you,  
an offering in spirit and in truth.

The point that Jones extracts from the text—not unfaithfully, I think—is

that the bread and wine 'shaped' and 'made other' by the words of the Canon are thus made not only acceptable to God but in a new way meaningful to man (whence the emphasis on *them*).

At the end of the poem, Christ himself is found placing himself in the order of signs:

He does what is done in many places  
what he does other  
    he does after the mode  
of what has always been done.  
What did he do other  
    recumbent at the garnished supper?  
What did he do yet other  
    riding the Axile Tree?

'He' is Christ, but also a Christian presbyter, and indeed any maker of signs, that is, any man, for the making of signs is what is done in many places, and any sign will combine the distinctive, the 'other', with the conventional, 'what has always been done'. Perhaps Jones has in mind here also the early English meaning of 'do' as 'to make', so that to 'do other' is to 'make other', to transform, to transubstantiate. Christ took the conventional, the given, and made it new at the 'garnished supper', and again 'riding the Axile Tree', that is, on the Cross.

That last line typifies the allusiveness of David Jones' later work. The Tree of the Cross is 'axile' because it is the axis of the world, *stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, and thus it recalls the world-tree, the Yggdrasil of Norse mythology. Jones learnt this association from the Old English *Dream of the Rood* and expressed it in paint in his *Vexilla Regis*. But there is a further echo: Christ riding this axis recalls Apollo riding the chariot of the Sun, an association that goes back to primitive Christian iconology.

A large section of *The Anathemata* describes a voyage, made at indeterminate date, from the Mediterranean or Middle-sea to the Lear-sea, the sea around Cornwall, from one end of the empire to the other, and on to London. This leads up to a narrative of the Last Supper and Crucifixion. Jones is trying to show the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as a focus of all that was achieved within the limits of the Roman Empire under Roman rule, but also before and since. He is not hinting with Belloc that 'Europe is the faith and the faith is Europe', or that there is no civilisation outside the territory of the former Roman Empire, but expressing a conviction that Christ overcomes the barriers between men, between Londoners and Welshmen, between Briton and German, between cave-painter and modern man, and that the Roman Empire, which saw universal peace at the birth of Christ, is a sign of this reconciliation and at its service. He often refers to the fact that the vestments of the Mass are derived from the everyday dress of both sexes

in Roman times. He painted Guinevere lying naked on a bed while her dalmatic hangs drying by an open window.

But his view of the Roman Empire is ambivalent: while celebrating its benefits, he makes much of Augustine's stigmatisation of it in *De Civitate Dei* as a *latrocinium*, a robbery. His short poem *The Wall*, set at an unspecified point on the *limes* at an unspecified time during the Empire, laments the decline in culture and religion since primitive days while *The Tutelar of the Place*, another short piece, sees the Empire as a ram destroying local cultures, with a clearly intended parallel to the advancing materialism and utilitarianism of modern times. In *The Anathemata* the image of a ram—a battering-ram—merges into the image of the Cross, the instrument of destruction becoming the instrument of salvation, which then becomes the keel of a ship, an ancient image of salvation linking the Cross with Noah's Ark.

If the priest is a man of boundaries for David Jones, it is as a defender of borders, a maker of enclosures. Jones' shares Langland's incarnational insight that in Christ there is no boundary between man and man, or between man and God. The whole of human experience and endeavour comes within the embrace of the Eucharist. Outside the enclosure lies only the inhumanity that threatens society. The priest—and anybody who 'makes other' is for David Jones in some sense a priest—is guardian of humanity, defending the forntier between the human and the inhuman, preserving the line that runs from Lascaux through the Cenacle and Calvary to today.



Literature does not offer us new theological definitions. The texts we have considered follow the Letter to the Hebrews in taking elements from inherited ritual and the established patterns of clerical life to fashion fresh images of the priesthood. They remind us that although ordination is common enough and baptism far commoner, priesthood fully lived is rare. They remind us, too, that the word 'priest' is not the exclusive property of theologians or of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Although Christian awareness can be distorted by non-Christian religions and cultures, it can also be enriched by them. Common notions of priesthood may be tinged with paganism, but the pagan is rarely if ever fully eradicated by the Christian. One of the strengths of the Catholic tradition is its ability to harness pagan instincts and energies. Too purified a theological discourse ceases to be the real speech of men.

If we conceive theology with the scholastics more in terms of questions than of answers, and if every *quaestio* is not only a question but a quest—a quest for words, for concepts, for images to lead us towards the humanly unattainable, then the groping syntax of the poet is one dialect of the theological language.