

**The Matter of Rome and the Matter of Britain
in *The Sleeping Lord* of David Jones**

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From the outset I want to stress the importance of studying what I have called the "sacramental principle" in David Jones' poetry, that is, the investing of symbolically freighted elements (e.g., water, wood, stone, wheat, grapes) and their humanly derived products (e.g., crosses, masts, dwellings, bread and wine) with a further weight of significance linked to our religious impulse to search for transcendent meaning in the transitory and to create otherwise useless objects (whether verbal, visual or tactile) as *signa* of that quest. In his two major poems we see two complementary expressions of such a sacramental vision which might be roughly categorized, respectively, as the ironic or parodic and the celebratory, or the dark and the bright. I am speaking here, of course, in terms of emphasis, since *In Parenthesis* has its share of celebration and *The Anathemata* its glimpses of darkness. *The Sleeping Lord*, unlike these more ambitious works, is a collection of nine fragments published in a variety of formats from 1955 to 1969; they were later collected into book form.¹

What I find characteristic of the fragments that make up *The Sleeping Lord* is a confrontation between these two visions: a return, in the matter of Rome, to the demonic sacraments of battle, but with an added note of irony for the way in which even these dark *signa* have been debased by an impersonal imperial ethos that would homogenize the world for the sake of efficiency and profit; and opposed to this, a stubborn note of celebration, in the matter of Britain, that looks to the particularities of place and time for salvation from the oppression of empire. In addition, there is a third optic to be found in the Mass poems, unpublished in Jones's lifetime, that relativizes the other two visions without diminishing either, precisely because it is able to focus on the suffering and the blessing as a single act of death transformed into life. Unfortunately, the Mass poems ("The Kensington Mass," "Caillech" and "The Grail Mass") are the least finished of the three major groups, and therefore the synthesis that they afford is more a promise than an accomplishment.

¹ David Jones, *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

Since *The Sleeping Lord* clearly represents Jones' own wishes for the published form of these poems, I shall concentrate on its versions in this thematic discussion. The method followed will be essentially an analysis of the principal images and motifs, with a particular interest in the way Jones' treatment of these elementary symbols affects and is affected by the overall mood of these poems, which I take to be generally somber and prophetic. For Jones, steeped in typology as he was, saw the crass and brutal world of the post-Augustan Roman Empire as foreshadowing our own. In such a world, even the secular *sacramentum* (or oath) of military service had been corrupted by an increasingly totalitarian state; no wonder, then, that the deeper sacramental world of natural signs and religious meaning should suffer decline.

One indication of that decline is the return of the kind of parody found in *In Parenthesis*, where the full horror of the trenches seemed to demand a demonic liturgy to give it expression; but where, at the same time, a paradoxical note of redemption could be heard amid the cries of desolation, a redemption wrought by comradely affection in the midst of fear and hatred. If anything, the soldiers' world in *The Sleeping Lord* is even bleaker, for the questionable but undeniable excitement of battle has been replaced by the grim and boring routines of occupation:

we shall continue to march
round and round the cornucopia
that's the new fatigue. ("The Wall," *SL*, 14)

"Kind Irene" and "little Plutus, the gold-getter" have replaced "Dea Roma" and "The Strider" in the soldiers' pantheon, and the new liturgy of war reflects the change. There is nothing heroic about the peace-time policing of merchants and the arresting of trouble-makers.

We see this most clearly in "The Tribune's Visitation." The parody here is quite sweeping, principally but by no means entirely religious in character. The troubled officer several times assumes the role of a secular Christ enduring his Passion, but he is also turned into a self-proclaimed Wordsworthian poet in his effort to communicate directly with his soldiers: "I have a word to say to you as men and as a man speaking to men" (*SL*, 49-50). As with the direct priestly allusions, this poetic one is deeply ironic: what the Tribune wishes to convey is a worldview as distant from Romantic poetry as from the Gospels. In the case of the latter, the Tribune begins his address with the words of Christ in Gethsemane, words Jones first parodied in Part 6 of *In Parenthesis* as the soldiers prepared for combat: "Let 'em kip on now and take their rest."² There the gently sad dismissal by Christ of his fatigued disciples is immediately overturned ("But they roused them now..." [*IP*, 146]) as the noncoms hurry their men into battle order. Here there is no particular irony as the Tribune attempts to relax his cohort for the bitter

² Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937, 1982), 146.

word and sacrament to come. Indeed it is precisely the tension between the authentic solicitude of this gospel phrase and the cynical harshness of the following address that gives "The Tribune's Visitation" its psychological interest. For the Tribune is a divided man, and the vehemence of his attack on the ties of family and locale is in direct proportion to his suppressed feeling for them. Once launched on his exhortation, the Tribune ruthlessly mocks everything particular and intimate as fitting only for women and children or their like. Both poetry and religious ritual are alien to the soldier's life:

Old rhyme, no doubt, makes beautiful
the older fantasies
but leave that stuff
to the men in skirts

who beat the bounds?
of small localities

...

It's the world-bounds we're detailed to beat. (*SL*, 50)

Between these two sets of "bounds" there can be no real commerce. On the one hand are the "bumpkin sacraments" of the "child-man" for whom nature and myth are joined: on the other, the "contemporary fact" of the soldier whose job it is to make wither "all the sweet remembered demarcations" so that all may "know the fact of empire" (*SL*, 51). Soldier and "child-man" stand in irreducible opposition; "the material vents and flows of nature," which the latter's consecrated wands bending in the fertile light...transubstantiate...into the breasts and milk of the goddess" (*SL*, 50) must remain for the former sheer physical fact, untouched by myth or mystery.

Even the soldiers' natural pietas toward their homeland is now suspect, for it "softens the edge of our world intention" (*SL*, 52). Here the parody shifts from the overtly sacramental to the biblical as the Tribune takes on the cadences of Paul the convert, recalling his impeccable Jewish pedigree to emphasize the need to surrender all claims to self-justification in order to enter the gospel kingdom of grace.³ The difference, of course, is that while Paul freely boasts of his dispossession because he is convinced he has entered a richer world, the Tribune begins by admitting loss ("I am in a like condemnation" [*SL*, 52]). For such a man – and the point of the Tribune's homily is that they all share his fate – memory is the most dangerous enemy, just as it is the poet's chief ally:

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³ See Acts 22:3; Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:21-23; Phil. 3:4-6

no explicit words of Institution ("This is my body..."), and thus without any saving power. Like the Caesarian baptism, it takes its initiates, including its self-appointed hierophant, only "From darkness/to a greater dark" (*SL*, 58). The sterility that has been the dominant characteristic of the soldiers' monosexual world throughout ("these fatigue-men our sisters, busy with the pots" [*SL*, 57]) finds its reflection in this barren secular cult.

To turn from "The Tribune's Visitation" to "The Sleeping Lord," the other text in which parody of Christian themes is a principal device, reveals the variety possible within even a constricted trope. For what distinguishes the transpositions in the latter poem is far more the generally celebratory spirit of *The Anathemata* than the often bitterly ironic tone of *In Parenthesis*. As noted earlier, in revising "The Sleeping Lord" for publication, Jones sought to underscore just this point by introducing a clearly sacramental description of a prehistorical burial into the poem's opening lines. All the "life *signa*" that distinguish this tomb and make it a human monument also serve a further hermeneutical purpose: either adjectivally ("viatic meal... sacral sea-shell trinkets...vivific amulets"), or substantively ("ivory agalma ...cerements...first of the sleepers" [*SL*, 71]). Without a specific reference to the Christian tradition, Jones manages by this series of verbal allusions to associate this tomb in Wales with the death and Resurrection of Jesus, thus adding still another mythic dimension to the already rich association of Arthur, Prince Llywellyn and the Palaeolithic "young nobilis."⁴

That same pattern of allusion and association continues throughout "The Sleeping Lord," most markedly in the long interpolated section that makes up two-thirds of the finished poem. Mary Magdalene ("Mair Modlen") is introduced, for example, along with Goewin, Pebin's daughter, of *The Mabinogion*, as models for Arthur's "foot-holder," again in a way that deliberately links the Celtic and Christian deposits, just as the following description of Christ as "Shepherd of Greekland" and "Heofon Cyning" draws together the classical and Anglo-Saxon worlds. If the Tribune's speech willfully distorts liturgy and holy writ to emphasize the demonic character of empire (ancient or modern), this description of Arthur's land and kingdom invokes these same sources to make of that world the great, good place for which creation longs:

Where the nentydd run
to conflow with the afon
where too is the running of the deer
whose desire is toward these water-brooks? (*SL*, 74-75)

⁴ Jones, *SL*, 71 (first mention). The "young nobilis" is another Christ figure for Jones; he even includes some Marian connections to enforce the point. On the same page, for instance, Jones has a long note linking the phrase "(a name of double-gladius piercings)" to Welsh Marian shrines and mentioning the gospel prediction that Mary's own heart would be pierced.

No ordinary deer these, but denizens of the forty-second Psalm and as such already emblems of man's desire for the absolute ("so panteth my soul after Thee, O God"). Similarly, the candle-bearer, like the foot-holder, another minor court figure, is quickly assimilated into a larger design so that he may reasonably

argue that
his *cannwyll* does indeed constitute
One of the three Primary Signa
of the Son of Mary
...*unig-anedig Fab Duw*
...*ante omnia saecula*
lumen de lumine...
by whom all things... (*SL*, 77)

The three-fold macaronic rendering of passages from the Nicene Creed here nicely illustrates, in linguistic form, the larger pattern we have seen: Jones' attempt to celebrate the multilayered character of creation as caught in the prism of man's imagining. So the humble candle-bearer's light not only brightens the king's presence but also illumines the nature of the incarnate deity whom we can know only by way of his *signa*.

With the appearance of the Priest of the Household on the next page, we move from liturgical allusion to liturgy itself, in this case the table blessing which represents an altogether proper foreshortened Eucharist in contrast to the Tribune's sacrilegious version. To reinforce this Eucharistic connection Jones introduces, in characteristically parenthetical fashion, a lengthy anamnesis into the ritual in the form of a memento of the dead, bracketed between two echoing rubrics: "His silent, brief and momentary recalling" (*SL*, 79) and "FOR THESE ALL/he makes his silent, secret/ devout and swift memento" (*SL*, 86). Fittingly, those first and most fully remembered were themselves masters of anamnesis, priests and monks who first "made the White Oblation" (*SL*, 79) in the varied regions of the Island whether in solitude or in community. These are followed by the civil rulers of the Island and their ladies and then, in an ever widening arc, by all the dead of Britain and, finally, indeed, "of the entire universal orbis" (*SL*, 86). Throughout this deliberately meandering insertion, a unifying thread links prayer and place in a mutually reinforcing bond, for it is always public prayer that is represented, the prayer of word and gesture that needs human signs for its expression. Furthermore, those "remembrancers" (whether poets or priests) have themselves become a part of the island, both physically ("whose bones lie under the green mounds" [*SL*, 84]) and as part of the living myth of Britain. Thus their fellowship with the Sleeping Lord is doubly sure and their place in a poem that celebrates his ubiquitous presence fully justified.

The poem's final Christian allusion returns us directly to its Arthurian beginnings in a passage that follows immediately on the reference to the king's foot-

holder in the poem's original form (as found in *The Roman Quarry*).⁵ And so, after a 20-page digression, we are back with the Sleeping Lord himself and his identification with the land:

Are his wounded ankles?
lapped with the ferric waters... (SL, 90)

The second half of the verse and the verses that follow lament the despoiling of Wales and its people for purposes of profit, a major theme of the poem, as already noted. But the reference to "wounded ankles" has another purpose, reminding us of the earlier description of the foot-holder's function:

In what deep vale
does this fidell official
ward this lord's Achilles' heel?
Does he lap
the bruised dandroed of his lord... (SL, 72)

Apart from the verbal play on "lap" which serves to link these two bracketing passages, the explicit Homeric reference and the implicit Christian allusion ("bruised dandroed") continue the pattern of placing Arthur of Wales within the wider world of classical and Christian myth. At this point in the poem only a single adjective ("wounded") is needed to elicit the resonance, for the universalizing theme has already been established. It is indeed a principal function of a sacramental aesthetic, as Jones understood it, to elicit just such responses, for it is established on the premise of man as a sign-making animal, instinctively attuned to the layers of meaning that reside in natural objects and human artifacts. Parody is but one of the literary possibilities this aesthetic opens up, whether bitterly ironic, as in "The Tribune's Visitation," or nostalgically celebratory, as here.

If we turn our attention now to image patterns that are repeated throughout *The Sleeping Lord*, we shall find a similar range of mood in both the Roman and British fragments. For instance, the image of the feminine, so important at the end of *In Parenthesis* and throughout *The Anathemata*, appears again in these poems as a countersign to the narrow masculine world of the legionary, where the only feminine presence is an emasculated group of military servants ("these fatigue-men our sisters, busy with the pots" ["The Tribune's Visitation," SL, 57]).

Not surprisingly, then, the first soundings of the theme come – in the initial Roman pieces, most dramatically in Private Clitus' dream about the Ara Pacis and its carving of the Tellus Mater; but even before that, the disillusioned narrator of "The Wall" rings a series of changes on Rome's feminine origins:

⁵ Jones, *The Roman Quarry*, Eds. Grisewood and Hague (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, c1981).

...where the totem mothers
imported
Ionian
of bronze
bright Capitoline forever...
O Roma
O Ilia
Io Triumphe, Io, Io
the shopkeepers presume to make
the lupine cry their own. (SL, 11)

It is the wolf figure from the painting "The Mother of the West," but without the hopeful sign of the Lamb taking suck from this Roman wolf.⁶ Rather than a new world rising out of the rubble of the old, the legionary describes a compromised state whose very symbol, the Capitoline Wolf, is foreign ("imported/Ionian/of bronze") and whose moment of victory ("Io Triumphe") is desecrated, in the spectator's eyes, by the taint of commerce ("shopkeepers presume"). By the end of the poem, indeed, "Dea Roma" has been transformed into "kind Irene," the patroness of a money-grubbing peace ("Plutus, the gold-getter"). The soldier's disillusionment and disgust at this perversion of his profession are reflected in sexual terms as well. On the one hand are the fiercely masculine ranks of soldiers with their standards:

Erect, crested with the open fist that turns the evil spell, lifting the flat palm that disciplines the world, the signa lift in disciplined acknowledgement, the eagles stand erect for Ilia... (SL, 11)

Such should be the true consorts of Roma and Rhea Silvia whose womb was chosen and hallowed to bring forth warriors but instead now "tabernacle[s] founders of/emporia." Both male and female have been debased by such a bargain, and the result is a sterile "megalopolis that wills death" (SL, 13).

Note:

An interesting variant in Jones' recorded version of "The Tutelar of the Place" further emphasizes the gulf that divides the world of these two poems by restoring the Johannine baptismal imagery to its pristine feminine form: "Open unto us, let us enter a second time (into thy belly) in those days..."; in the poem as published in *The Sleeping*

⁶For a wonderful image of Jones' painting "The Mother of the West," go to <http://www.imagine.org.uk/details/index.php?id=TWCMS:B8017&parent=random>. The painting is one of Jones' direct links between the "Roman" material and the Christian strata of all his work and speaks directly to the tension throughout *The Sleeping Lord* between the corruption of the Roman heritage and its revivification by Christian symbols and types.

Lord, the words in parentheses appear as "within your stola folds" (64). The spoken version fits better with the clear allusion to John's Gospel; more importantly, it seals the complementarity of the two poems in their respective conclusions, establishing for a final time the antithesis between the Tutelar and Caesar, between her world of fruitfulness and his of sterility.⁷

⁷ The recording, with an introduction by Aneirin T. Davies, was made on 9 November 1956 and aired on the Welsh Home Service of the BBC on 18 December 1956: BBC record #23511, available in the Poetry Reading Room of the Lamont Library of Harvard University.