

**DAVID JONES'S 'BARBARIC-FETISH':  
FRAZER AND THE 'AESTHETIC VALUE' OF THE LITURGY**

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**Abstract:**

Much recent critical interest in the relationship between modernism and religion has concerned itself with the occult, spiritualism and theosophy as opposed to institutional religion, relying on an implicit analogy between the experimental in religion and the experimental in art. I argue that considering Christianity to be antithetical to modernism not only obscures an important facet of modernist religious culture, but also misrepresents the at-once tentative and imaginative thinking that marks the modernist response to religion.

I explore the ways in which the poet-painter David Jones combined sources familiar from cultural modernism – namely Frazer's *The Golden Bough* – with Catholic thinking on the Eucharist to constitute a modernism that is both hopeful about the possibilities for aesthetic form and cautious about the unavoidable limitations of human creativity. I present Jones's openness to the creative potential of the Mass as his equivalent to the more recognisably modernist explorations of non-Western and ancient ritual: Eliot's Sanskrit poetry, Picasso's African masks and Stravinsky's shamanic rites and suggest that his understanding of the church as overflowing with creative possibilities serves as a counterweight to the empty churches of Pericles Lewis' seminal work, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*.

**Keywords:** Religion, Christianity, Ritual, Church, Eucharist

**Works Discussed:** *In Parenthesis*, *The Anathemata*

The question of analogy seemed not to occur until certain Post-Impressionist theories began to bulk larger in our student conversations. Then, with relative suddenness, the analogy between what we called ‘the Arts’ and the things that Christians called the eucharistic signs became (if still but vaguely) apparent. It became increasingly evident that this analogy applied to the whole gamut of ‘making’.<sup>1</sup>

David Jones, the Anglo-Welsh poet-painter, told this anecdote a number of times. It provides a window on not only how he became a Catholic convert but also – and perhaps more surprisingly – how he became a modern artist. Catholic theology helped Jones recognise the significance of the perspectival shift instituted by experimental art in the early twentieth century, and that informed his artistic practice – through his association with Ben Nicholson’s Seven and Five Society and beyond – and his modernist episodic and fragmentary poems *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*.

This yoking of Catholicism and modernism may appear confusing. For many critics Christianity in all its institutional forms was part of the tradition from which modernism broke and that served, for those who did turn to it, as a ‘therapeutic abatement of the pressures of modernity, like the return to nature represented by the Boy Scouts or National Parks movement’ rather than a source of inspiration for epochal works.<sup>2</sup> On the Catholic side, too, Jones’s claims brokered consternation. The contemporary Catholic liturgist Romano Guardini warned: ‘The liturgy is art, translated into terms of life. Sensitive people clearly recognize its wealth of expression, its symmetry of form, and its delicate sense of proportion. As a result, such people are in danger of appreciating the church’s worship merely for the sake of its aesthetic value.’<sup>3</sup> Jones’s friends also expressed concern at his collapse of art theory and sacramental thought.<sup>4</sup> My epigraph thus courts the risks faced by ‘sensitive people’ all too

willing to latch on to ‘aesthetic value’. There is a separation in Guardini’s thought – albeit a problematic one in light of the historic entanglements of institutional religions and patronage of the arts – between faith commitment and aesthetic appreciation.

Recent scholars of modernism and religion have been less willing to separate the two. Helen Sword in *Ghostwriting Modernism* (2002) presents spiritualist séances as not only ministering to spiritual needs that couldn’t be met by institutional religion but also negotiating concerns about gender and authorship. Sword’s female mediums were able both to make otherworldly contact and to claim a hand in the authorship of challenging new ideas through their channelling of male voices.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the popularity of spiritualism as a non-traditional belief system owes much to the literary opportunities it afforded female mediums. Sword’s work is a careful exploration of the intersections between aesthetics and religion that thinks seriously about the nature of the investment mediums made in mediumship. Nevertheless, given the fascination of modernist critics with the occult, spiritualism and theosophy there is a danger, for scholars lacking Sword’s diligence, of relying upon an implicit analogy between the experimental in religion and the experimental in art.<sup>6</sup> Jones’s linking of Catholicism and post-impression belies the claim that spiritualism is entwined with modernism to a greater extent than traditional variations of Christianity. Institutional religions also underwent modernising processes that were by turns popular and contentious, and fed into literary modernism.

Thinking about religion in this way requires a new approach. Older accounts of modernist religion frequently turn on forms of syncretism. In *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (1997), Michael Bell argues that the peculiar engagement of modernism with myth was facilitated by the attrition over the course of the nineteenth century of both religious thought and scientism.<sup>7</sup> As the heirs to this intellectual history, a select number of modernists were, so Bell argues, liberated to think and

feel in mythical – although pointedly not Christian – terms, while remaining analytical enough to recognise that the place of such thought was in aesthetic works alone. The mythic and the sceptical are thus welded into a syncretic belief system with clear limits. Not all mythic thinkers had the intellectual strength to maintain the necessary connections though; Ezra Pound is Bell's example of a writer who lacked the cynicism or restraint that was characteristic of 'modernist mythopoeia'.<sup>8</sup> Bell's concept has much to recommend itself insofar as it explores the changed status of belief in modernity, while its obvious limitations – namely, the careful demarcation of aesthetic thought from wider cultural forces – are the product of changing scholarly fashions. More difficult to explain away, however, is Bell's assumption that modernists held what amounts to a coherent theology, equal parts mythic and sceptical, which misrepresents, I think, the way in which cultural influences shape the creative process and undermines the work that a literary text does; not, that is, exemplifying a pre-conceived worldview, but rather making new and imaginative connections.

More recently, the anthropologist Meredith B. McGuire has examined religious commitments under the heading of 'lived religion'.<sup>9</sup> She argues that while Christian theologians and clerics have promulgated a unitary belief system, their congregations have been habitually – to use the official terminology – heterodox. The faithful are, she contends, far less concerned with coherence and systematisation than the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and are typically happy to combine aspects of the official religion with folk beliefs and personal intuitions.<sup>10</sup> In effect, what Bell sees as a coherent modernist theology is, in this anthropological reading, the natural outcome of the conflicting demands placed upon a person of faith; McGuire's subjects find themselves necessarily implicated in a syncretic worldview. While her study of religious borrowing from a number of different thought systems goes some way to explain Jones's fascination with both post-impressionism and Catholicism, the limitation of McGuire's approach for this essay is that modernist interest in belief is often

attuned to the points of tension between different thought worlds, rather than accepting *tout court* the combinations proposed. In other words, my opening epigraph contains within it the recognition of the almost wilful perversity of Jones's student conversations and the two-fold imprint they bore upon his life. I argue that Jones's bringing together of Catholicism and post-impressionism is by turns courageous and humble, revealing his willingness to take bold imaginative leaps while remaining aware of the dangers of misfit between the different elements in the imagined combination.

In keeping with this, Jones's notion of the aesthetic value of religion encompasses an awareness of the challenges modernity has posed for institutional Christianity at the same time as he refuses a separation between the aesthetic and the religious. This is not to elide aesthetic and religious experience – although the idea of religion as an experience is the product of specific historical forces that made such an elision conceivable – but rather to suggest that Jones's interest in the aesthetic potential of religion was part of his response to a perceived civilizational challenge.<sup>11</sup> In particular, I argue that Jones – in line with major modernists like T.S. Eliot and H.D. – took J.G. Frazer's confrontation with Christianity in *The Golden Bough* far more seriously than a number of his Christian contemporaries. His response to Frazer was to suggest that in setting out what the anthropologist considered the many barbarous antecedents to Christian practices and ideas among ancient and non-Western religions, Frazer had been working with an impoverished notion of sacrifice. Jones countered this with an understanding of sacrifice developed from Catholic Eucharistic thought, which, in his view, offered an important corrective to processes of civilizational decline. Jones's repeated recourse to the Mass in his literary work serves as an alternative to the empty churches Pericles Lewis explored in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010).<sup>12</sup> For Jones, churches are not deserted monuments, but rather lively centres of creativity and humour and my exploration of this perspective not only emphasises an aspect of religious

culture much neglected in recent work on modernism and religion, but also sets out a different form of modernism, one in which the commitment to imaginative transformation is nevertheless weighed against its provisional, limited and ultimately hopeful character.

### **THEOLOGICAL MODERNISM AND *THE GOLDEN BOUGH***

Jones's reference to the 'eucharistic signs' in my epigraph situates liturgical thinking at the centre of his aesthetic insofar as he recalls how the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass helped him appreciate what the post-impressionist theorist Clive Bell meant by 'significant form'. While notoriously elusive – it puzzled Bell's collaborator, Roger Fry and exasperated Jones's mentor, Eric Gill – the phrase was one that Bell defined against naturalistic 'representation' in visual art and, more positively, as 'forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws [...that] move us profoundly.'<sup>13</sup> Jones repeatedly returned to Bell's critique of 'representation'. In an analysis of William Hogarth's painting *The Shrimp Girl*, Jones observes that the painting involves 'a lot besides verisimilitude to the accidents of nature' and went on to add that 'whatever the material and immaterial elements of that "reality" may have been, the workings of Hogarth's art gave to the world a *signum* of that reality, under the species of paint.'<sup>14</sup> In place of Bell's invocation of aesthetic emotions – the aspects of a painting that 'move us profoundly' – Jones concerns himself with the 'reality' that 'significant form' brings into being. He understands this process by means of the analogy of the doctrine of transubstantiation that is invoked in '*signum*', where the Latin recalls the 'eucharistic signs' of the epigraph, and 'species' which is drawn from the scholastic definition of the doctrine. Transubstantiation attests to the idea of the bread and wine used during the Eucharistic service becoming 'the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ [...] when the words of consecration [...] are pronounced by the priest in Holy

Mass.’<sup>15</sup> The critique of representation and the doctrine of transubstantiation came together in Jones’s insistence that ‘This is not a representation of a mountain, it *is* “mountain” under the form of paint.’<sup>16</sup> He took the post-impressionist insistence on ‘form’ as opposed to representation, and used transubstantiation to explain how that form is or becomes ‘significant’.

Despite drawing on this ‘theory’ or theology, Jones’s focus was on what was done during the Mass. He considered the liturgy important in its celebration of and ministrations to human creativity, and complained about Catholic apologists who described the sacraments as in some way ‘helps to our “infirm” condition rather than absolutely central and inevitable and inescapable to us as creatures with bodies, whose nature it is to *do this*, or that, rather than *think it*’.<sup>17</sup> These comments came in response to the broad reforms of the Roman Catholic liturgy ushered in by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which not only altered the text of the Mass, but also decreed that the Mass be celebrated in the vernacular rather than Latin.<sup>18</sup> Jones saw these changes as undermining the status of the Mass as something creative in and of itself – refined and polished by Christian communities and liturgists over hundreds of years – in order to meet the perceived immediate needs of a modern congregation: to use the language of Jones’s own social theory developed from his reading of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and German cultural critic Oswald Spengler, it ceased to be something gratuitous and became utile.<sup>19</sup>

These changes serve as signposts for one modernising trajectory within liturgical practice. Comparable developments had formed part of Anglican theological modernism earlier in the twentieth century. The Churchman’s Union, with its journal the *Modern Churchman*, was the professional body that represented those keen to adapt Christian doctrine to the values of contemporary society.<sup>20</sup> The organisation achieved notoriety in the wake of its eighth annual conference, which addressed the theme of ‘Christ and the Creeds’; the

revisionary Christology discussed at Girton College, Cambridge in 1921 took its lead from the ideas that there was ‘not a vast gulf between the Divine Nature and Human Nature’, and that God was revealed primarily ‘by the still, small voice in the awaking consciousness of man’.<sup>21</sup> The outcry that greeted these controversial formulations occasioned a Church of England doctrinal enquiry.<sup>22</sup> In terms of the liturgy, Hastings Rashdall, a leading light of the movement, downplayed the significance of sacrament and ritual, and argued – in a variation on the idea that angered Jones of Church services as ‘helps to our “infirm” condition’ – that the ‘performance of ritual ordinances, sacrifices, acts of worship, etc., will thus only be valuable in so far as they stimulate to the doing of God's will in the service of man.’<sup>23</sup> Christian life is about not irrepressible obsessions, revealed dogmas or ritual acts, but rather ethics or, as an unimpressed T.S. Eliot put it in his review of Rashdall’s work, ‘the usual structure of prejudices of the enlightened middle classes’ that passes for a code of ethics and to which Christ is progressively ‘assimilated’.<sup>24</sup>

Jones proposed his own trajectory for modernising liturgical thought through his absorption of a key source text for modernists, J.G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1906-1915). This monumental thirteen-volume work has enjoyed an epochal place in accounts of modernism since Eliot directed perplexed readers of *The Waste Land* in its direction. Yet despite the challenge Frazer’s work posed for Christians in the comparisons he drew between the Christian story and liturgy and earlier often violent myths and rituals, it bothered the theological modernist Rashdall very little because the Anglican churchman insisted that there was ‘no good ground for supposing that the doctrine of the atonement held by the earliest Christians was in any direct way due to the primitive pagan ideas about dying gods.’<sup>25</sup> Jones’s willingness to develop an understanding of the Christian liturgy that responded to Frazer’s work is part of the wider modernist commitment to the liberating possibilities of ritual. From *Le Sacre du printemps* to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the closing ‘shantih’ of *The Waste*

*Land*, modernists turned time and time again to ancient or non-Western rituals and the associated arts in search of direct access to something more real, primal or vital from which they considered themselves to have been cut off by the intervening processes of civilization.

This interest in ancient ritual has been categorised as part of modernist primitivism. Here the primitive is ‘idealized because it is seemingly other to civilization. What is idealized is [...] what is most brutal, sexual, and contrary’.<sup>26</sup> Critics working within a postcolonial framework have laboured to show how ‘what is most brutal, sexual, and contrary’ often misrepresents, obscures or imposes upon the cultural phenomena these adjectives claim to describe. This inability to see other cultures clearly has not simply produced the wrong answers to the kinds of questions primitivism was invoked to answer, but rather led to the formulation of the wrong questions in the first instance. In her analysis of D.H. Lawrence’s exploration of communal rituals in Mexico and elsewhere, Maria Torgovnick has argued that ‘it seems more than likely [...] that the oceanic sensations Lawrence ascribed to Indians actually existed within himself.’<sup>27</sup> Lawrence would have been better served by considering why ‘the West sought to repress [...] direct correspondence between individual beings and the collective life force’, rather than projecting the longed for correspondence onto the rituals he surveyed.<sup>28</sup> Jones’s invocation of Frazer and the liturgy, however, suggests that fascination with ritual among modernists can also be understood as a response to a crisis in attitudes to Christian worship, and one that resulted in an alternative to the modernising trajectory followed above.

One difficulty in this argument is that Frazer’s work and Christian debate seem resolutely opposed. Anti-Christian polemic certainly plays a role within *The Golden Bough*, but it is balanced with other elements including a collage of fantastic myths and rituals and an exemplar of a new quasi-scientific comparative method. The anthropologist also changed his own mind as to the emphasis placed upon the polemic over the course of three editions (1890,

1900, 1906-15).<sup>29</sup> His discussion of ‘The Crucifixion of Christ’ in particular – which drew comparisons between ritual murder and the Christian story – was moved to an appendix in the third edition and removed altogether from the abridged version (1922).

While this editorial decision witnesses to a softening of the anti-Christian message in later editions, Frazer nevertheless remained circumspect in his handling of the Crucifixion itself. Drawing on his work on scapegoats, Frazer argued that the widespread practice of ritual humiliation helped explain the relative roles of Christ and Barabbas within the gospel stories, and enabled him to identify the latter as a mock king. He also suggested that the older, deeper and widespread link between the health of a king and the fertility of the land traced through the dying god sequence of *The Golden Bough* – and of which scapegoating was a later sublimation – primed the population for the reception of Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Frazer’s final words on the matter proposed two potential interpretations of these correspondences:

The devout Christian will doubtless discern types and forerunners of the coming Saviour [...while the] sceptic [...] will reduce Jesus of Nazareth to the level of a multitude of other victims of a barbarous superstition, and will see in him no more than a moral teacher, whom the fortunate accident of his execution invested with the crown, not merely of a martyr, but of a god. The divergence between these views is wide and deep. Which of them is the truer and will in the end prevail?<sup>31</sup>

Frazer himself was committed to a sceptical line of enquiry and was sympathetic to the ideas of the social theorist Harriet Martineau who, in the mid-nineteenth century, described Christians as ‘the adherents of a decaying mythology’ and accused them of ‘following the heathen, as the heathen followed the barbaric-fetish.’<sup>32</sup> Yet his willingness to entertain

Christian interest in ‘forerunners’ speaks to what Frazer considers the persistence of the dying god motif; a comparable account of human obsession was developed by Sigmund Freud – an avid reader of Frazer – in his suggestion that a primal act of parricide exerted a similar influence upon human cultural development.<sup>33</sup>

Frazer’s hint about ‘forerunners’ was seized upon by Anglican theological modernists other than the critical Rashdall. Five years after their notorious summit on ‘Christ and the Creeds’, the thirteenth annual conference of the Churchman’s Union was conducted in a much lower key and convened on the theme of the ‘Sacraments: their History and Psychology’; among the papers delivered, the anthropologist and Anglican canon, H.J.D. Astley addressed the topic of ‘Primitive Sacramentalism’.<sup>34</sup> Astley accepted Frazer’s contention that Christian sacramental practice had its roots in an ancient worldview – ‘magic and religion combined are the essence of sacramentalism’ – and drew on the processes of substitution and sublimation familiar from *The Golden Bough*. These led away from the ritual murders at Nemi and towards later animal and vegetable sacrifices or ritual humiliations, and ultimately to rites that bore only a faint resemblance to their founding violence.<sup>35</sup>

Astley was less sympathetic to Frazer’s interest in the persistent nature of the dying god motif and human obsession with it and instead treated the material in terms of evolutionary theory. Ritual ‘cannibalism’, Astley insisted, was the earliest forerunner of the Eucharist and its development could be traced through animal and plant substitutions up to the ‘Unbloody Sacrifice’ of the Christian sacrament.<sup>36</sup> Astley’s bolder genealogy carried a none-too-subtle barb:

Ideas as old as man, and still endowed with a living power among savages, are sublimated to the uses of the world's highest religion; while superstition, the surviving relics of these ideas of the antique world, still endows the Bread

and Wine in the Eucharist with the actual Body and Blood of the Crucified,  
Risen, and Glorified Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Frazer's account of sublimation and substitution, moving away from the violence of ritual murder, is not, for Astley, a process of ossification, where rites continue to exist with their true meanings and justifications increasingly obscured, but rather one of teleological evolution terminating in the 'Unbloody Sacrifice'.<sup>38</sup> Astley's account is predicated on his disdain for the Anglo-Catholic insistence on the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Anglo-Catholic proceedings had been recounted in the *Modern Churchman* with a mixture of horror and disdain as both theological modernism and Anglo-Catholicism attracted more and more supporters through the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> This anti-Catholic feeling would erupt the year after the conference in question in the Prayer Book crisis of 1927-28, when the House of Commons vetoed revisions to the *Book of Common Prayer* on the basis of the alleged prominence of 'Roman sacerdotalism' in the new version.<sup>40</sup> Astley contended that the Anglo-Catholic, or for that matter Roman Catholic, understanding of the sacraments retained traces of the cannibalism from which Christianity, properly understood, represented a further stage of removal.

T.S. Eliot publically challenged the charge of 'Roman sacerdotalism', and the unwillingness to downplay the significance of ritual more widely marks a reaction to particular modernising processes within institutional religion.<sup>41</sup> Responding to the revelatory power of *The Golden Bough*, Jones drew on the idea of primitive rituals as 'forerunner[s]' of the Christian event without ever shying away from what Frazer called their 'barbarous' connotations. Frazer's work, in his view, is to be commended for making these difficult issues a matter of debate. This catholicity of perspective is on display in *In Parenthesis*, when, at stand-to, Private John Ball, gazing out at Mametz Wood, catches sight of a damaged branch;

the notion of sacrifice is invoked to help convey an image but, as the passage progresses, the figurative language takes on the more definitive outlines of a vision:

His eyes turned again to where the wood thinned to separate  
broken trees; to where great strippings-off hanged from ten-  
uous fibres swaying, whitened to decay – as swung  
immolations  
for the northern Cybele.

The hanged, the offerant:

    himself to himself  
    on the tree.

Whose own,

whose grey war-band, beyond the stapled war-net –

[...]

Come from outlandish places,

from beyond the world,

from the Hercynian –

they were at breakfast and were cold as he, they too made

their dole.<sup>42</sup>

‘The hanged, the offerant:/ himself to himself/ on the tree’ is an adaptation, as Jones’s note points out, of an Icelandic poem recalling a ritual murder:

I know that I hung on the windy tree

For nine whole nights,

Wounded with the spear, dedicated to Odin,

Myself to myself (*IP*, 204).<sup>43</sup>

The poem alluded to recounts an act of substitution for the ritual murder of the divine king in which the King of Sweden, Od or Aud, sacrificed ‘nine of his sons to Odin [...] in order that his life might be spared’.<sup>44</sup> Jones was drawn to the correspondence between the story and the Christian gospel, and invoked the older tale he later explained in order to enable readers to ‘feel the amazing nature of what our theology proposes’, too often obscured by later accretions and excessive familiarity.<sup>45</sup> If it is comparable to, for instance, the use of ‘shantih’ in *The Waste Land* in its attempt to register immediacy through the invocation of unfamiliarity and a romanticising of otherness, the move nevertheless betrays some residual anxieties. The very otherness of the event – the murder of a son other than Christ also involving a prominent symbolic use of a ‘spear’ and a ‘tree’ – is re-written so that the difference that might shock a reader into realisation rests on the ambiguity of the verb ‘hanged’, recalling both the painful posture of the Crucified Christ and the alternative method of execution associated with the displaced Odin, ‘Lord of the Gallows’.<sup>46</sup> The residual strangeness is registered in the perpetual stasis of the extract, trapped in the fragmentary syntax and liturgical multiplication of nouns; the dying God is at once Christ and King Aud’s son in an event that has not only happened at certain points in history, but also served – in the spirit of Frazer’s argument – as a perpetual obsession throughout time.

While this note of mourning accords with Ball’s mood and that of his opposing numbers in the German trenches who likewise make their ‘dole’, the invocation of sacrifice serves an additional function. The association of the damaged tree with the sacrificial acts recounted thereafter follows on from the pun on ‘strippings-off’, which recalls, across linguistic boundaries, the Old English poem ‘The Dream of the Rood’ – one of Jones’s great poetic

inspirations. In this, the young hero, Christ, is said ‘ongyrede’ or ‘to strip’ before mounting ‘the tree’.<sup>47</sup> The event itself occurs after the tree’s uprooting and subsequent relocation and is described in terms of violent assault along the lines of the ‘immolations’ offered to Odin. It is thus dramatically important that the sacrifice – however visionary – is associated with German troops. He alludes to the common German heritage of the Swedish worshipers of Odin and the German soldiers in order to underscore the savagery of the enemy; the kind of savagery that was discussed in British propaganda and reflected in the trench-talk of the men of Ball’s company: ‘these/ barbarians,/ them/ bastard square-heads’ (*IP*, 69). The Germans on the other side of Mametz wood are the ‘grey war-band’ from the ‘Hercynian wood’ whose ancestors sacrificed to Odin, the ‘northern Cybele’.<sup>48</sup> Jones does not explain away the violence inherent in ‘the amazing nature of what our theology proposes’ even though it posed a challenge to his life, thought and work given the significance he assigned to the rituals Frazer explored.<sup>49</sup> He addressed the problem by expanding his sense of sacrifice.

### **OFFERING THE WORK OF ART: RITUALISM AND OBLATION**

In a letter prompted by critical hostility to his reading of George Herbert’s poem ‘The Sacrifice’ with which he had closed *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), William Empson outlined his distaste for ‘a Supreme God who takes pleasure in giving torture’, a God who seemed to him ‘ineradicable’ from any version of Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Empson’s reading of ‘The Sacrifice’ – marked by the tension he detected between the plaintive, liturgical refrain ‘*Was ever grief like mine?*’ and the notes of Christ’s personal sense of the injustice of his situation – culminates in an account of the following stanza:

O all ye who passe by, behold and see;

Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree;

The tree of life to all, but only me:

*Was ever grief like mine?*

[...Christ] climbs the tree to repay what was stolen, as if he was putting the apple back; but the phrase in itself implies rather that he was doing the stealing, that so far from sinless he is Prometheus and the criminal.<sup>51</sup>

While specialists remained unconvinced by the doctrinal critique here ascribed to Herbert, Empson's reading was nevertheless timely. The questions Frazer raised about the Crucifixion encouraged Empson to see in Herbert's Christ not only the resigned victim, but also the Promethean hero unwilling to be the subject of the substitutionary immolations practised by the likes of King Aod throughout human history.<sup>52</sup> While Anglican theological modernists cited Frazer in order to score cheap points against Anglo-Catholics, Empson, by contrast, refused to back away from the disconcerting violence in which Christianity was implicated. Jones recognised, too, the scale of the challenge this violence posed, but was equally unwilling to explain away or minimise the role of ritual. Caught between these rocks and associated hard places, Jones was pushed to develop his own imaginative solution that ultimately drew on Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology.

Jones was guided in this by the three-volume theological study, *Mysterium Fidei* (1921) authored by the French Jesuit, Maurice de la Taille.<sup>53</sup> While he was introduced to de la Taille's ideas through friends in 1920-21, the delay in an English translation of this Latin work meant that Jones did not read the first two volumes until the early 1940s. Before that, he had access to Martin D'Arcy's *The Mass and the Redemption* (1926), which drew heavily on de la Taille's ideas, and to a summary of de la Taille's arguments, by the author himself, published by Sheed & Ward in the early 1930s. Having lived with de la Taille's ideas for over

a decade before reading him directly, Jones turned to *Mysterium Fidei* for neither the nuances of the argument nor its wealth of patristic detail, but rather its bold reframing of ‘sacrifice’ to include not only the physical destruction of Christ on the cross – destruction as evident on Odin’s gallows as in the Crucifixion and termed by de la Taille an ‘immolation’ – but also the liturgical offering at the Last Supper, which was labelled an ‘oblation’.<sup>54</sup> This connected the Last Supper, the Passion and the Roman Catholic Mass, as Jones freely admitted, through self-giving and offering up, rather than the breaking of the bread, wafer and body of Christ.

De la Taille’s work served as a challenge to what Cardinal Henri de Lubac described as the ‘over-complicated systems worked out in modern times, indeed ever since the Council of Trent, about the sacrifice of the Mass’.<sup>55</sup> The Roman Catholic *Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (1902) – named the ‘penny catechism’ because of the price it commanded and widely used among Roman Catholics during the first half of the twentieth century – insisted that the ‘Eucharist is not a Sacrament only; it is also a sacrifice.’<sup>56</sup> Yet like the aforementioned Council of Trent that had described the Mass as a ‘divine sacrifice’, the catechism retained a broad understanding of the nature of sacrifice: ‘A sacrifice is the offering of a victim by a priest to God alone’. This definition retains room for an understanding of sacrifice as both immolation and oblation, and provides a rich vocabulary for addressing the question of sacrifice that Frazer’s work went on to make urgent in a new way.<sup>57</sup>

The relationship between Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and liturgical sacrifice was thrown into relief by the publication of Gregory Dix’s *The Shape of the Liturgy* (1945) – a book upon which Jones drew when putting together *The Anthemata*. Dix’s work caused a stir insofar as it argued that the *Book of Common Prayer* presented the Eucharist service not as an anamnesis or a re-presenting of Christ’s sacrifice, but rather as a commemorative meal that only symbolised the action on the cross.<sup>58</sup> The furore that attended the publication might well be considered a companion to the public discussion triggered by the alleged ‘Roman

sacerdotalism' of the revised Prayer Book. The difference between the two understandings of the Eucharistic service has a theological underpinning that goes back to the sixteenth century and Martin Luther's worry that to describe the Mass as a sacrifice was to term it a 'good work' of man, an act of propitiation, in which man gave something to God: 'For [Luther], to call the Mass a sacrifice is to derogate from the one perfect sacrifice of Calvary'.<sup>59</sup>

While 'Immolation' and 'oblation' had been used interchangeably in Catholic liturgical documents, de la Taille insisted upon their semantic differences. For the Jesuit, they alluded to two different moments in the Easter story – the events in the upper room and on the hill:

The Supper and the Passion answer each other. They complete and compenetrates each other. The one presents to our eyes the sacerdotal, sensible, ritual oblation, wherein consists the mystic immolation; the other adds to it the real, bloody, all-sufficient immolation, of which the first was the figure.<sup>60</sup>

An oblation, for de la Taille, was a formal liturgical offering made from an inward disposition, and which – in terms of the contemporary Catholic debates – balanced out too great a focus on events on the hill; de la Taille's recent interpreter, Michon Matthiesen, has argued that contemporary neo-scholastic accounts of the Eucharist tended to seek, 'in the sacrifice of the Mass, a realistic and repetitive "immolation"'.<sup>61</sup> The emphasis placed upon the Supper amounts, on the one hand and as Jones himself argued, to an argument as to when the sacrifice began; at the point at which Christ offered 'oblative words & manual acts' at the Cenacle.<sup>62</sup> On the other, it insists that the liturgical and creative aspects of worship – the *signa*, said throughout history in the Mass – were also instituted by Christ. The Supper and the Mass, while not separate, were also not collapsible into the Crucifixion, as if all the trappings of the Christian liturgical tradition were nothing more than the staging of a

technical, cultic act. Jones's commitment to this aspect of his religious heritage enables him to care for the 'aesthetic value' of the liturgy without becoming one of the aesthetes or 'sensitive people' Guardini attempted to warn off.

For de la Taille and Jones, it was not only Christ's Passion that was important, but also his self-offering that included the creation of a liturgy designed to celebrate and re-present the act of immolation. The Mass that Christ instituted, in Jones's mind, was a work of art that revealed something about humankind: to be human is to be an artist, a maker, a creator, given that this creative function was undertaken by he whom the church considers the most perfect exemplar of the human.<sup>63</sup> This is the context in which Jones's favourite phrase of de la Taille's, 'He placed himself in the order of signs', is to be understood, and the creative potential that Jones locates in the Mass stands in stark contrast with Astley's and Rashdall's respective arguments.<sup>64</sup>

The emphasis de la Taille placed upon the act of oblation allowed Jones to develop a correspondence between human creative activity and religious ritual, as a counter narrative to that established between such ritual and human barbarity by Martineau, Frazer and their descendants. In Jones's version, the sceptic to whom Frazer gestured holds an impoverished notion of sacrifice. In using Christian theology to respond to questions raised within cultural modernism, Jones's amalgam of Frazer and de la Taille serves as an illustration of the new way of writing about religion I have proposed; not, that is, an invocation of a syncretism that draws on ideas from different worlds of thought and moulds them into an idiosyncratic faith, but rather an attempt to bring different ideas together in imaginative and hopeful possibility. The Mass shares forms and commitments with avant-garde artists: Eliot, Picasso, and Stravinsky among them, and offers a challenge to or even a refutation of the utilitarian bent of society at large. Jones was aware that this was only ever a peripheral concern – the priest in *The Anthemata* 'stands alone' and 'more precariously than he knows guards the *signa*' – and

his is not a modernism that elides the modernist desire for aesthetic transfiguration with evangelism.<sup>65</sup> Quite the contrary, Jones's work meditates on the imaginative potential of this solution, and hopes, too, that readers can share in it.

While de la Taille himself did not address Frazer directly, the neo-scholastic insistence on 'immolation' in Eucharistic theology – as Astley's article illustrates – naturally raised questions about the relationship between Christianity and sacrificial violence. The two were repeatedly linked in Jones's mind; in a letter written at the end of his life, he slipped seamlessly between a discussion of de la Taille's significance for his work and an account of the previously quoted passage from Frazer on the sacrifices to Odin.<sup>66</sup>

The same connection is made in the celebratory ending of the previously quoted section of *In Parenthesis*. Following the vision of the Christ-Uppsala sacrifices in the wood, German carollers disrupt Ball's reverie:

And one played on an accordion:

*Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen*

*Aus einer Wurzel zart.*

Since Boniface once walked in Odin's Wood.

Two men in the traverse mouth-organ'd;

four men took up that song.

*Casey Jones mounted on his engine*

*Casey Jones with his orders in his hand.*

Which nearer,

which so rarely insular,

unmade his harmonies,

honouring

this rare and indivisible

New Light

for us,

over the still morning honouring (*IP*, 67-68).

The Germans strike up a German-language carol on the accordion and their volley is returned by two British mouth-organists and four singers with an English-language folk song. The voices of either side modulate against each other. The English language musical retort sounds out as an antiphon to the German carol – the scene takes place on Christmas day – and the narrative reflects in a lyrical tone upon the event, signified by means of the move into a spiritual register and a changing typography. The shifts between sacred and secular culture, reminiscent of the shuttling back and forth between music hall and poetic traditions in *The Waste Land*, speak for an irrepressible creative urge, honoured here even on the most miserable of Christmas days. This chant is responsible for ‘honouring/ this rare and indivisible/ New Light/ for us’. This ‘New Light’ is both immediately temporally relevant – the new light of the morning, the light that precipitates the stand-to – and also the ‘New Light’ brought by Christ, using the words of the collect from the second Mass of Christmas Day; the complete passage recalls the Christ of the Crucifixion and of the Incarnation, Easter and Christmas.<sup>67</sup> Above all this rare outburst signifies a moment of ‘honouring’ within the trenches: an honouring of the soldiers themselves (it is done ‘for us’), of the morning and of God. The passage encompasses suffering immolation and joyous oblation, and the scene oscillates between these two poles as Jones attempts to capture the elusive nature of life in the trenches. For Jones, the Mass was neither barbaric nor outdated, but rather the inspiration for his experimental literature; it responded not only to Frazer, but also to Stravinsky’s rites, Picasso’s masks, and Eliot’s Sanskrit chants. Preceded by struggle and followed by slaughter,

this transitory moment envisions an alternative not in terms of the blinding revelation of St Paul on the road to the Damascus or the flaming into meaning of the modernist epiphany but rather in possibility. Far from being a ‘therapeutic abatement of the pressures of modernity’, Jones’s turn to Catholic theology develops an imaginative solution to questions raised by a variety of modernist crises from the horror of the mass slaughter of the trenches to the erosion of value by the utilitarian orientation of society at large.

### **BETWEEN THE QUEEN AND THE ALTAR: CREATIVITY AND THE MASS**

The challenging combination of Frazer and de la Taille allows Jones to think of religion and literature or, indeed, art more widely, in terms of mutual interpretation: artistic insights enabling a better understanding of one’s religion and *vice versa*. In contrast, Jones’s mentor, the sculptor and stonemason, Eric Gill, conceived of the relationship in unidirectional terms. Gill’s response to Clive Bell’s post-impressionist notion of ‘significant form’ was to ask ‘significant of what?’<sup>68</sup> For all its apparent flippancy, Gill’s query resembles Roger Fry’s puzzled review of Bell’s *Art* (1914): ‘How do we recognize significant form? By its power to arouse aesthetic emotion [...] What is aesthetic emotion? [...] the emotion aroused by significant form.’<sup>69</sup> Where the critiques differ is in Gill’s sense of how works of art partake of meaning; for him, art was the exercise of a skill in accordance with the established excellences of a particular artistic discipline, with the resulting beauty partaking of, and pointing towards, God’s beauty. ‘Significant form’ as a criterion thus lacked the necessary religious reference point, and showed itself insensitive to the particulars of various branches of art, at least to Gill’s mind. Jones criticised Gill’s dogmatism: ‘I never thought that quite fair because ... a work ... was a thing in itself with its life deriving from a juxtaposition of forms’ and – as I explained earlier – supplemented Bell’s account with Eucharistic thinking.<sup>70</sup> While

both were Catholics, Gill's defined parameters for art and religion were not Jones's; the 'life' of these artistic works helped Jones understand what was at stake in his religion and *vice versa* – he might well have added that a work of art, and none more so than his own, was always the product of a 'juxtaposition' of influences held together in tentative possibility.

The importance of juxtapositions to Jones shows the limitations of critical accounts that assign him a singular theology whether of the syncretic kind proposed by Michael Bell or a more orthodox Catholic theology. Jones's repeated accounts of the Roman Catholic Mass, notably in the 'Mass within the Mass' scene in 'Mabinog's Liturgy', instead bring together in teasingly suggestive ways his appreciation for the liturgy and his more challenging ideas about the artistic ramifications of oblation. The passage in question begins with a celebration of the Queen Gwenhwyfar's dress, prior to her entry into her chapel, and then moves on to describe the altar:

So, wholly super-pellished of British wild-woods, the chryselephantine column (native the warm blood in the blue veins that vein the hidden marbles, the lifted abacus of native gold) leaned, and toward the Stone.

And on and over the stone  
the spread board-clothes and on this three-fold linen the  
central rectangle of finest linen and on the spread-out part  
of this linen the up-standing calix that the drawn-over  
laundered folds drape white (*TA*, 203).

There is a conflict here between the typography and the syntax. The decision to break up the text not only into two paragraphs, but also to indent the second paragraph so as to make the

first line a completion of what becomes the final broken line of the previous paragraph, underlines the tensions at work in this typographical decision; the blocking of the text insists on the difference between the two sections while the presentation of the respective last and first lines of the paragraph as a single line, arranged by the author rather than the mere convenience of the printer, insists upon a connection. While the ‘column’, ‘the hidden marbles’ and the ‘Stone’/‘stone’ are clearly architecturally related, the typographical break underlines a switch between the referents of the nouns: Gwenhwyfar (the ‘column’ and ‘the hidden marbles’) and the altar (‘the stone’). Likewise ‘And on and over’ not only suggests continuities through its opening coordination but also continues a section-long trend in which the narrator directs the reader’s gaze over Gwenhwyfar’s clothing: ‘Below’, ‘here’, ‘together’, ‘within’, ‘from where’ ‘downward from’, ‘down over’, ‘downward’ and ‘over’, only to switch at this moment to gesturing at the altar (TA, 196-202).

Gwenhwyfar and the beautifully dressed altar become twin exempla of the human capacity for oblation, sign-making and creativity. ‘The drawn-over/ laundered folds [that] drape [the calix] white’ recall the ‘many various folds/ with the many lights/ playing variously on the folds of [Gwenhwyfar’s] wide *lacerna*’ (TA, 202). ‘The carefully prepared altar’ collapses into the carefully adorned queen. Jones goes to such great lengths to underline the crossovers between the two because, for him, the sacrifice of the Mass is not only the cultic immolation familiar from *The Golden Bough* but also the re-presentation of foundational creativity. The section closes with a joke about the confusion of queen and the altar, as Jones describes the reaction of the men in the chapel as Gwenhwyfar enters the Mass just prior to the Elevation of the Host:

It was fortunate for the innate *boneddigion* of Britain that  
when at the prayer *Qui pridie* she was bound as they to raise

her face, she as they, faced the one way, or else when the  
lifted Signa shone they had mistaken the object of their  
Latria (*TA*, 205).

The assembled gentlemen (*'boneddigion'*) cannot take their eyes off her. The joke turns on the tone of voice in which one hears the obligation of being 'bound' to raise one's face: censorious or wry. Of course, the actions of the Mass, from the lifting up to the ringing of the bell, aim to direct the attention towards the correct object of Latria, but the genesis of *The Anathemata* was a section of Jones's earlier, incomplete work, 'The Book of Balaam's Ass', which surveyed the various distractions faced by a congregation during the Mass.<sup>71</sup> Thomas Dilworth insists that even the later reworking, *The Anathemata* 'begins [...] with the physical or mental presence at Mass of a meditative daydreamer. He is the ultimate persona. The poem is his momentary epiphany of consciousness and subconscious awareness' – in other words the whole poem dramatizes a moment of distraction.<sup>72</sup> Jones daringly suggests that the object of the Mass and the objectified mass of Gwenhwyfar, encrusted with the finest workmanship in the land, exert equal demands on the attention. As Jones argued elsewhere, human acts of craftsmanship:

[P]artake in some sense, however difficult to posit, of that juxtaposing by which what was *inanis et vacua* became radiant with form and abhorrent of vacua by the action of the Artifex, the Logos, who is known to our tradition as the Pontifex who formed a bridge 'from nothing' and who then, like Brân in the *Mabinogion*, himself became the bridge by the Incarnation and the Passion and the subsequent Apotheoses.<sup>73</sup>

While Jones can sometimes speak of the ‘analogy’ between human and divine creativity, the circumvention of ‘in some sense, however difficult to posit’ contemplates something more.<sup>74</sup> Human sign-making was charged with divine power in Christ’s oblation at the Last Supper, and it is in such acts of ‘juxtaposition’, of creating and sign-making, that man continues to share in this power. Jones refused a deliberate distinction between the dress and the altar because both are signs, both are revelatory of the truth, both give access to the divine. The chuckle of the ‘*boneddigion*’ urges us to hear this as a liberating and living possibility. The chapel – far from being the empty relic of Pericles Lewis’s *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* in which churches function as museums where modernists study the nature of religious experience – is filled with the imaginative possibility of Jones’s suggestion.<sup>75</sup>

## **JUXTAPOSING MODERNISM AND RELIGION**

Jones’s understanding of creation – whether human or divine – as a ‘juxtaposition of forms’ has much to recommend itself to a discussion of modernism and religion.<sup>76</sup> ‘Juxtaposition’ – ‘the action of placing two or more things close together or side by side’ (‘Juxtaposition’, *OED*) – differs from ‘syncretism’ insofar as it resists the desire to bring ‘diverse tenets’ into ‘union’ (‘Syncretism’, *OED* 1). Jones insisted on the significance of ‘oblation’ in sacrifice notwithstanding the criticism de la Taille’s work received within the Catholic community, while also resisting the powerful counterarguments offered by Frazer and others. He was well aware that his attempts to find in the Mass what others of his generation explored through uses of African masks, Sanskrit poetry, and shamanistic rites was anomalous and surprising. His work was the product not so much of a reasoned synthesis but rather his willingness to stage clashes between different worlds of thought. *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*

frequently reflect on such collisions or combinations, and these musings are part of the substance and structure of the poems.

‘Juxtaposition’ also proves a useful term for describing the modernising process to which religious faith itself was opened up. The philosopher Charles Taylor has explored the ways in which religious faith has been reshaped in the modern era by the pressure exerted on it by the public presence of alternative worldviews and perspectives. In light of the multiplication of available outlooks, to be a Christian is not simply to be a Christian, but also not to be a humanist, a spiritual seeker, or a member of another faith. There are of a course a range of ways in which one might respond to such a proliferation of viewpoints, stretching from a fundamentalist denial of the validity of these alternatives to theological modernist attempts to adapt understandings of one’s own faith in light of the insights of other perspectives. The juxtaposition in which Jones’s poetry trades – whatever one’s assessment of its value – is part and parcel of modernist religious culture.

T.S. Eliot drew attention to the importance of such juxtaposition for an understanding of atheism and broader themes of secularisation. He contended that ‘Atheism is often merely a variety of Christianity’, and elaborated on this suggestion:

There is the High Church Atheism of Matthew Arnold, there is the Auld Licht Atheism of our friend Mr. J. M. Robertson, there is the Tin Chapel Atheism of Mr. D. H. Lawrence. And there is the decidedly Low Church Atheism of Mr. Russell.<sup>77</sup>

The various values advanced by these supposed free-thinkers, Arnold, Robertson, Lawrence and Russell, are understandable only in relation to – or in juxtaposition with – the forms of Christianity from which they were trying to free themselves. Without an understanding of the type of religion with which they were trying to break, it is difficult to understand the kinds of

society these figures wanted to develop. More recently, Finn Fordham has suggested the origins of the term ‘modernism’ can be traced to opposition to a religious worldview, having been appropriated from and in defiance of what Pope Pius X condemned as ‘modernism’ in his bull *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907).<sup>78</sup> Inverting Eliot’s argument, I have suggested that Jones’s Catholicism is best understood not as a turn from modernism, but rather as a sustained conversation with aspects of modernism that seemingly would have nothing in common with it. If Eliot believes that Christianity is a far more potent force within his epoch’s atheism than its key theorists were ready to admit, then my argument is that Jones’s Catholicism is tied up with modernism in a way that modernist studies has yet to disentangle.

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4 Thomas Goldpauh, ‘The *Signum* of Some Otherness: David Jones and a Eucharistic Theory of Art,’ *Flashpoint* 18 (Summer 2016), <http://www.flashpointmag.com/index18.htm>: 1-31 (1).

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- 36 Astley, 'Primitive Sacramentalism', p. 294; Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VIII: *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild, Part II* (1912), pp. 48-108. Diderot notoriously linked the Eucharist and cannibalism in his entry for the *Encyclopédie*
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- 38 Astley, 'Primitive Sacramentalism': 294.
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