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IRENIC MODERNISM:

THE EARLY WORK OF DAVID JONES AND W. H. AUDEN

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## ABSTRACT

“Poetry,” W. H. Auden wrote in 1939, “makes nothing happen.” Thirty years earlier these words would have declared poetry's independence from any ethical, political, or religious obligations. Written as they were the brink of total war, we might try to hear them instead admitting poetry's defeat, its failure to save the world from itself. Auden's line continues, however: “it survives.” The poem thus promises that Auden's vulnerable admission of poetry's uselessness to be itself usable, as a counterbalance to the utilitarian violence of the world into which it enters. My dissertation, “Irenic Modernism: The Early Work of David Jones and W. H. Auden,” concerns this promised peace of poetry, and how its eponymous figures understood it to be achieved through the writing of a vulnerably useless poem.

I argue that Jones and Auden converged independently on what I call an irenic, that is, peaceful modernism, distinct from but intimately entangled with the “ire” of their closest contemporaries' work. These contemporaries divide into two camps, which George Orwell described in generational terms: around 1930, “The typical literary man ceases to be a cultured expatriate with a leaning towards the Church, and becomes an eager-minded schoolboy with a leaning towards Communism.” In some ways Jones and Auden were like the cultured expatriates, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot, writing difficult, experimental poetry imbued with ritual significance. In others ways, they more resembled the eager-minded schoolboys, whose guiding star was Wilfred Owen: inheriting a literary field already marked by high modernism, they reacted not against decadent passivity, but against dehumanizing violence. But Jones and Auden differed markedly from both generations in their understanding



of poetry and the poet's place in the world. Both were both poets of what it means to live as *homo faber* in a world populated by fellow artists. Unlike the cultured expatriates, they believed the poet to have no special authority; unlike the schoolboy communists, they believed poetry to have no particular purpose. For Jones and Auden, though a poet is born when he senses an apparent vocation to poetry, he reaches maturity when he recognizes this sense for what it truly is, a useless but significant mark of our common humanity.

The introductory chapter of “Irenic Modernism” explicates this theory of poetry as a peaceful avocation as found in Jones’s and Auden’s later writings. This theory developed, however, only after these authors had artistically worked out what an irenic poetry would look like. The next four chapters move through a series of works by Jones and Auden, tracing how a new approach to poetry gradually emerged over the first two decades of their careers. Chapter 2 shows how, in a series of painterly and lyrical depictions of landscape, they discovered that poetic vision would need to emerge, not from the position of an autonomous observer, but from that of an implicated participant. Chapter 3 looks at these authors’ experiments in poetic theater, and how they attempted not to establish a new community of art but rather to affirm the value of membership in the old. Chapters 4 and 5 take an extended look at these authors’ midcareer masterpieces, Jones’s 1937 prose epic *In Parenthesis* and Auden's 1944 closet drama “The Sea and the Mirror,” showing how both works seek to overcome the threat of poetic fratricide, that is, of community-destroying rivalry between poems and persons, by mediating between individual experience and communal understanding. Finally, a concluding chapter considers Jones’s and Auden’s direct responses to the contemporaries named above, to see what their poetic principles look like when put into critical practice.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This book examines the early work of two British heirs of high modernism, the painter and poet David Jones and the poet and dramatist W. H. Auden, and finds between them a deep affinity. By “deep,” I do not mean that it is somehow hidden from sight, but only that it will take some time to get into focus, and that it will be worthwhile to do so, substantially improving our understanding both of these poets and of modernist poetry in general. For these poets discovered their modernist inheritances to pose them similar aesthetic problems, and they approached those problems in remarkably similar ways.

To grasp the nettle of Jones’s early work we could do worse than to look at his 1924 woodcut *The Nativity*. As an aesthetic object, representing the traditional artistic subject of Madonna and Child, the print is radically ambivalent, pitting hieratic impersonality and formal composure against expressionist subjectivity and frantic claustrophobia. The entrance of the transcendent into history is marked by an almost iconic stylization, but also by an embrace and a gaze that seems more than just maternal. The two are embedded in the traditional pastoral landscape, but the margins almost entirely cut it off from view, and the heavy lines of the woodcut suggest that the stark paradox of God become man cannot coexist with the subtle fluctuations in color true landscape requires. Even more strikingly, this representation of the Word Incarnate devotes three-fifths of its area not to image but to words borrowed from an ancient Marian prayer, words concerned with this very problem of how meaning enters into matter. Though the faux-naif lettering might momentarily convince us that these words do not signify beyond their sensual texture, still the presence of the inscription calls into doubt

whether “aesthetic object” is the correct way to describe what we see here. Does the quotation make the print into a prayer, directly addressing God? Or does its status as Christmas card make it instead an instrument for deepening bonds of human community?



*Illustration 1: David Jones, Nativity, 1924. Wood engraving, 11.5 by 9.5 cm. Private collection. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, reproduced with permission.*

Similar questions to these arise, I find, when I contemplate a poem of Auden's published untitled in 1935, and later given the name "On This Island."<sup>1</sup> Though sound has taken the place of sight, still the poem stages an encounter with a rich aesthetic texture, within which hovers a perfectly pellucid meaning that nevertheless leaves us perplexed, and uncertain for what purpose we have been addressed:

Look, stranger, on this island now  
The leaping light for your delight discovers,  
Stand stable here  
And silent be,  
That through the channels of the ear  
May wander like a river  
The swaying sound of the sea.

Here at a small field's ending pause  
Where the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges  
Oppose the pluck  
And knock of the tide,  
And the shingle scrambles after the suck-  
-ing surf, and a gull lodges  
A moment on its sheer side.

Far off like floating seeds the ships  
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands,  
And this full view  
Indeed may enter  
And move in memory as now these clouds do,  
That pass the harbour mirror  
And all the summer through the water saunter.

This poem's texture, like that of the sea itself, is at once invitingly peaceful and surprisingly violent. Its sentences offer no resistance and betoken no hidden meaning, yet the sonic effects lead the reader's attention to "wander like a river," and he struggles to comply with the poem's

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<sup>1</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 130–1.

opening direction to “Look” rather than listen. The second stanza, in particular, surrounds him with “the swaying sound of the sea,” as slant-rhyme, alliteration, and enjambment, together with the sight of the ragged right margin, suggest the “pluck | and knock of the tide” rising and the “suck-l-ing surf” receding. Does this address have anything to teach the reader, besides the experience it offers? The images of the cliff face where “a gull lodges | A moment on its sheer side,” make the poem seem a temporary, if precarious, respite. A respite from what, we learn in the third stanza, where the ships “diverge on urgent voluntary errands,” a chiasmus of mistake (“diverge,” “errands”) with will (“urgent voluntary”), crying out for correction. The ships also, however, raise the possibility of a larger community’s “full view,” in contrast to which the solitary stranger’s “small field’s ending” feels claustrophobic. By the time we reach the sauntering last line, we are no longer sure what to make of the first line’s claim on our attention: are we called to respond with aesthetic appreciation? With missionary zeal? Or by engaging in the imperfect but vital human community we share with this poem’s author?

I would mention one further resemblance, not between these works exactly, but between the place of these works in their respective oeuvres. Each was subject to a limited but nevertheless real act of authorial redaction. Jones found himself dissatisfied with the inscription on the lower three-fifths of the image and cut it off the block, allowing later printings to include only the nativity scene itself, now stripped of its explicitly oratorical and communal context.<sup>2</sup> In 1936, Auden’s publisher, needing to move forward without Auden’s input, named his new volume of poems *Look, Stranger!*, a title Auden insisted on changing for the 1937

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<sup>2</sup> Bankes and Hills, *The Art of David Jones*, 40.

American release to the less confrontational *On This Island*.<sup>3</sup> We can recognize in both of these decisions a desire to pull back from direct address, as if Jones and Auden came to doubt that the purpose of poetry could be furthered through contact with the poem's audience.

I interpret this retreat as follows. For over half a century, by the time Jones and Auden were writing, modernist poetry had been at war with its audience. The work of art had been cut off from its cultural context and then launched back into that context with an obscure and threatening message. This dynamic can be dated back to the judicial condemnation of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857, and by the 1920s it was sufficiently out in the open that Robert Graves and Laura Riding could write matter-of-factly: "The quarrel now is between the reading public and the modernist poet over the definition of clearness."<sup>4</sup> Jones and Auden quickly became disillusioned with these ongoing hostilities and longed instead for a poetics of peace, one which could bring the artist, his audience, and his artwork into a harmonious relation. The question for them became how such a relation could be achieved. In the redacting of *The Nativity* and the retitling of *Look, Stranger!*, we can see Jones and Auden recognizing that cultural peace cannot be achieved by fiat, that an announcement of peace, in a medium colored by its prior use for acts of war, will inevitably harbor lingering notes of poetic wrath. This is the double meaning of my title phrase "irenic modernism": Jones and Auden's modernism is *eirenikos*, pacific, non-polemical, non-violent, but only through its distinctive response to its native ire, its inherited tendency toward allegedly righteous anger.

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<sup>3</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 303.

<sup>4</sup> Graves and Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, 84.

The first section of this introductory chapter will elaborate on what this conversion of the ireful into the irenic looked like, once Jones and Auden accomplished it. My approach here will draw primarily on their later critical writings, particularly concerning the cultural status of the poet. These prose pieces allow us to step back and sketch the broad currents of their aesthetic thinking, and how it differs from the approaches current among their contemporaries. This introduction's second section will take a further step back, discussing Jones, Auden, and British modernism in general, not through their piecemeal attempts to understand themselves, but through the comprehensive theories of various critics and scholars. Necessarily, such a discussion will also give a sense of this project's intellectual lineage and affinities. I close the introduction by summarizing the argument of the dissertation as a whole. By this point we will have a picture of where Jones and Auden began and where they wound up. The key question, over the next five chapters, will be how they brought themselves from one place to the other.

Before I set out, however, I should briefly address this central pairing of Jones and Auden, which my opening readings can only do so much to motivate. I grant that the comparison is slightly eccentric, but beg the reader's indulgence at least until the close of the next section, by which point it should stand on firmer ground. For now, I will say this. Both Jones and Auden were poets of late modernism, in the sense of encountering the modernist revolution in poetry only after the *annus mirabilis* of 1922 was a *fait accompli*. Further, both were confessedly Christian poets, and Christians of a priestly variety, whose post-conversion work almost always took on a theological tinge, even when the topic was entirely mundane. The two have thus occasionally been discussed together under the heading of "Christian modernist,"

often with Eliot included as well.<sup>5</sup> It was in this guise that the idea of writing, as I initially intended, on Jones, Auden, and Eliot together, first entered my mind. But this is no longer quite the ground on which I seek—as I now seek—to pair Jones and Auden, and hence it proved better to leave Eliot to the side.

My reasons for omitting Eliot from my central line of argument will become clear in the final chapter, where he makes an extended appearance. But I will say here what the *fact* of setting Eliot aside entailed. First, it meant that this could not be a study of interaction or of influence in the usual sense. Jones and Auden both knew Eliot, and were aided early in their careers by his work as editor at Faber, but Jones and Auden did not know one another's work until later in their careers, and even then any significant influence seems improbable. It would be absurd to argue that together they constituted an identifiable school within late modernist poetry.<sup>6</sup> But this lack of awareness only makes more significant the fact that they each independently followed the same line of development. I am not arguing for influence, but for

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Medcalf, "Eliot, David Jones, and Auden," which, however, has room only to point out the possibility of such a comparison.

<sup>6</sup> On the topic of influence, Jones seems to have disagreed with me: on hearing that Auden had referred to him favorably in a review, he responded that "the later Auden had derived a great deal from him, and the payment of the debt is no more than just" (Blissett, *The Long Conversation*, 71). But Jones's suggestion does not seem entirely plausible, since Auden had not read Jones until the fifties, while we can recognize the seeds of his later conclusions in work dating back to the thirties. At most, Auden found in Jones a handful of formulae that accorded well with his prior convictions. Jones, meanwhile, seems hardly to have read Auden (as he hardly read any of his contemporaries), and is reported to have said that, "while he was grateful for Auden's appreciation, he and Auden were utterly different and, sadly, had nothing artistically in common" (Dilworth, *David Jones*, 282). Apart from this anecdote, Auden's name appears only in passing in the most comprehensive biography of Jones, amid catalogues of contemporary poets who valued Jones's work, while Jones's name appears nowhere in the best critical biography of Auden.



convergence.<sup>7</sup> “Convergence,” of course, is a vague term, and I must specify in what way Jones and Auden’s careers moved together. This leads me to the second effect of sidelining Eliot: I cannot mean that they converge on “Christian modernism,” of which Eliot would have to be the poster child. But “Christian modernism” names most of the ideological overlap between Jones and Auden. If this does not affect my argument, it is because I do not focus on these poets’ shared ideological backgrounds. I focus, instead, on their similar aesthetic activities.

In what way similar? A superficial survey of Jones and Auden’s artistic work does not suggest that such a comparison will be promising. Jones is remembered primarily as a painter and as the author of *In Parenthesis*, a poetical prose epic narrating six months in the trenches of the Great War in an obtrusively allusive, elusive, and yet strangely earnest style, while Auden is best known for being, for a brief period in the 1930s, the figurehead for a generation of politically engaged writers, his work of central importance simultaneously to poetry, prose, and drama—a position with which he was never comfortable, and which he quickly abandoned in favor of Horatian civility. These two do not seem very much alike, and perhaps this is why a comparison of their poetry has not heretofore been seriously attempted.<sup>8</sup> While acknowledging the differences, I would emphasize one point of convergence between these two brief summaries, already visible in the fact that I was forced to describe the work it concerned, not

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<sup>7</sup> This project is in this way unlike many of the best books focused on a pair of modernist poets—for example, Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality*, Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate*, and Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*—which focus on how two poets influenced one another’s careers even after they fell out of friendship. It is closer to Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, a study of a poet and a philosopher whose work converged before they became aware of one another.

<sup>8</sup> The number of scholarly works discussing the two together is really astonishingly small—the most notable, focused on their later work, is Schmidt, “Anamnesis and the Sanctification of Time.”

as “poetic,” but as “artistic.” Each of these men was in both theory and practice less a poet of the lyric word than an artist in the broadest sense: Jones was “engraver, soldier, painter, poet,” as the subtitle of a recent biography styles him; Auden, best known for his lyric poems, was also a dramatist, librettist, and prolific essayist and reviewer. My comparison of the two will not focus only on one or two poetic works, or even solely on poetic works, unless the word “poetic” is taken the way Jones and Auden themselves usually took it, in its broadest sense, including also art, music, drama, and essay. Above all, this book will be a comparison of the two poets and their artistic lives.

### 1. Poetry as an Avocation

The lives of poets have long been central to their ideas of poetry. One way to tell the story of modernist poetry is to ask: does a poet have a vocation to poetry, in the religious sense of the word “vocation”—a special calling, from some higher power, that determines that trajectory of one’s life? Or is poetry merely a digression from the important parts of life—an “avocation,” we might call it—in deflationary terms, an amusement, a hobby? This section will describe Jones and Auden’s answers to these questions. Before doing so, however, it will be helpful to survey the responses of three prior authors with whom Jones and Auden would have been familiar.

The first two, and the contrast between them, I borrow from Geoffrey Hill’s “A Postscript on Modernist Poetics.” In that essay Hill attempts to organize our understanding of British high modernist poetry, and how it establishes, or fails to establish, or refuses to establish its own poetic authority. Hill puts great emphasis on the comparison of the poet-priest Gerard

Manley Hopkins with the magus-poet William Butler Yeats.<sup>9</sup> As Hill interprets it, this polarity is distinct from and prior to any polarity between commitment and detachment, whether the commitment in question be political or religious. The issue at hand is, rather, whether one can be a poet (either of commitment or detachment) at all, or whether one can only be a human being who on occasion writes (either committed or detached) poems. Yeats famously believed that to be a poet was to be called to serve in “the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith,” the faith of the religion of art.<sup>10</sup> Yeats’ own long career was a testament to that belief, a record of continual reinvention, aimed at nothing besides the perfection of the poetic work. In contrast, Gerard Manley Hopkins thought his true vocation to be to the Society of Jesus. His poetry was at best irrelevant and at worst destructive: “I have never wavered in my vocation,” he wrote, “but I have not lived up to it. I destroyed the verse I had written when I entered the Society and meant to write no more [...] it is a question whether I did well to write anything else.”<sup>11</sup> In keeping with his scruples, Hopkins didn’t really write that much else. His post-conversion poetry can be fit onto a few dozen pages. Hopkins, in short, was the quintessential minor poet, while Yeats was the quintessential major one. These are not judgments of poetic merit, but of poetic outlook: poetry was central to Yeats’s life, to Hopkins’s, it was eccentric.

Hill’s account suggests the possibility of a third way between Hopkins and Yeats’s ideas of a poetic vocation, one which claims for the poet the mantle of the priest, but only in a provisional or paradoxical sense. Though Hill does not identify any modernist poet with this

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<sup>9</sup> See “A Poscript on Modernist Poetics” in Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, especially 571.

<sup>10</sup> Yeats, *Collected Works* IV:150.

<sup>11</sup> Hopkins, *The Major Works*, 249.

position (perhaps reserving it implicitly for himself<sup>12</sup>), one writer who fits the bill is James Joyce. Consider a scene from his quasi-autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which the young man of the title, Stephen Daedalus, for a time considers joining the Catholic priesthood. Here Daedalus converses with the director of his Jesuit-run school<sup>13</sup>:

–Have you ever felt that you had a vocation?

Stephen parted his lips to answer yes and then withheld the word suddenly. The priest waited for the answer and added:

–I mean, have you ever felt within yourself, in your soul, a desire to join the order? Think.

–I have sometimes thought of it, said Stephen.

But in the end, Stephen does not join. He perhaps has a vocation, but not to the Catholic priesthood: he longs to be, as he later calls himself, “a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.”<sup>14</sup>

Joyce’s position seems at first little different from Yeats’s declaration of the poet’s natural priesthood—but certain qualifications need to be made. Stephen’s self-description, to begin with, is not Joyce’s. *Portrait* may be quasi-autobiographical, but it is also self-ironizing, as Joyce reinforces in his next novel, *Ulysses*, in which Stephen shows up as a failed and self-deluded poet. Joyce may depict his own youthful desire to become a priest of poetry, but he does not imagine that any such ordination can in fact take place. This irony points us toward

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<sup>12</sup> Or, perhaps, recognizing the incoherence of treating such an unstable combination of views as a position at all. Regarding Hill’s attitude toward poetic authority, I agree with these words from Brett Bourbon’s essay “The Remittance of Mistrust”: “His mistrust is of the kind that I mistrust: a latter-day disappointed romanticism, aspiring to faith and motivated by desire for divine language, which invokes language as a redemptive power and then abuses it as fallen and humanity as unworthy” (Bourbon, “The Remittance of Mistrust,” 281).

<sup>13</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist and a Young Man*, 170.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

another difference: Joyce only finds the metaphor of the poet-priest inadequate because he takes it so much more seriously than Yeats ever could. For Yeats, whose faint ties to Christianity were all to a quite low-church Protestantism, the metaphor is just a phrase, an evocative image, at best a sociological analogy. But the cradle Catholic Joyce cannot forget his knowledge of the Catholic theology of vocation.<sup>15</sup> In the brief passages I have quoted we see Joyce taking vocation seriously in two ways. First: Stephen readily admits he has thought about being a priest, but hesitates to affirm the word “vocation.” He hesitates, I suggest, because “vocation” means calling, and so implies the existence of one who calls, that is, of a god. Poetry might make one long to be its priest, but it has no voice of its own (even if it is made out of voices), and so can only call you to be its priest in a highly metaphorical sense. Second: Stephen recognizes that a priest does not simply wield cultural authority, but performs rituals, and particularly the ritual of eucharist. When Stephen speaks of “transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life,” he is imagining performing an act of aesthetic transubstantiation, of his life into living poetry, perhaps even of himself into a poetic Christ. But since there exists no canonical form for the aesthetic sacrament Stephen desires to enact, his rituals have no hope of achieving a general validity: he will be a Christ only for himself.

So far I’ve sketched three ways in which a poet can understand the phrase “poetic vocation.” For Yeats, the phrase is unproblematic: the poet just is a priest. For Hopkins, the phrase is a bad joke: the poet may happen to be a priest, but there is nothing priestly about his

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<sup>15</sup> A classic discussion of the distinction between Catholic and Protestant theologies of vocation is found in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ch. 3, esp. note 1, p. 154–157.

being a poet. For Joyce, the phrase is a beautiful impossibility: the poet longs to perform rituals as deeply meaningful as those of the priest, but he can have no faith that those rituals reach out to any divine presence, nor can he justify his claim to possess the authority required for their performance. These are not the only possible poetic answers to the theological question with which I began, but they are, I think, the three main types of answer: “yes,” “no,” and “if only.” None, I will argue, is the answer given by David Jones or W. H. Auden. These British modernist poets, both from the generation after Joyce and the generation before Hill, and both caught, like Joyce and Hill, between the Hopkinsian and the Yeatsian understanding of the poet’s authority, did not dream of an impossible aesthetic religion, but rather sought to work out a meaningful role for the poet within a Christian framework which precludes the equation of poet and priest.

I will begin laying out Jones’s and Auden’s conception of this role just where, as Jones and Auden themselves told it, our authors’ poetic lives both began, with their youthful sensing of something like a poetic vocation. It will surprise no one familiar with either poet’s work to find that he writes about such a sense. It may be somewhat more surprising to hear that, if we attend carefully to their words, in each case a vocation turns out to be precisely what it was not. It is in this non-vocation that we first glimpse the alternative Jones and Auden each separately propose to the poetic priesthood of the disappointed romantic. Here is Jones, from his “Autobiographical Talk”:

I had decided by about the age of six that when I grew up there was only one thing that I would do. By which I do *not* mean that I was possessed of some special sense of vocation. Not at all. I mean simply that I cannot recall a time when drawing of some sort was not an accustomed activity and one which I supposed I should pursue later in

life. For one thing, I was so backward at my lessons that I do not doubt but what I regarded drawing as a counterweight to my deficiency in everything else.<sup>16</sup>

Compare this with Auden's self-undermining vocational anecdote, which he recalled over and over; here is one version, from the unpublished lecture "Phantasy and Reality in Poetry":

Given my passionate interest as a boy in mines, I and my parents naturally assumed that, when I grew up, I would become either a mining engineer or a geologist. So at Public school I studied science and won a scholarship to Oxford in biology. It was not to be. One Sunday in March 1922, I was walking across a field with a schoolfriend, when he asked me if I ever wrote poetry. Good God, no I said. The idea has never occurred to me. Why don't you he replied, and at that moment I discovered my vocation.

When I ask myself why my friend's suggestion met with such an unexpected response, I now realize that, without knowing it, I had been enjoying the use of poetic language for a long time. I had read the technological prose of my books on mining in a peculiar way. A word like *pyrites*, for example, had not, to me, been simply an indicative sign, it was the Proper Name of a Sacred Being [...]<sup>17</sup>

Jones and Auden respond in characteristically different ways to the potential for confusion between aesthetic and religious, between the beautiful and the sacred. The prickly defensiveness of Jones' denial is striking. He adopts this tone, in the first place, because he takes the religious concept of vocation seriously and does not want anyone to attribute to him a vocation he did not believe he possessed. But even this is not quite so simple, for "vocation" means different things in Catholic and Protestant contexts, and at the age of six Jones was an Evangelical (and, as he tells it, an unusually devout one). In denying that God called him to be an artist, Jones simultaneously rejects the purported equation between artist and priest, and denies that any calling deserves the name "vocation" but a calling to the priesthood. The final sentence's brief act of self-analysis, wherein Jones attempts to neutralize the thought of an artistic vocation by genealogically tracing it to his feeling of ineptitude for other work, hints

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Auden, *Prose* VI:713.

that the thought of an artist-priest was, for the enthusiastically Protestant young Jones, a live possibility, and, for the older Catholic convert, a danger to be avoided.

Auden's account is comparatively mild, though rife with subtle ironies that call into question its apparently straightforward avowal of a poetic vocation. Auden does not reject the word "vocation" off the bat because, unlike the Catholic Jones' association of vocation with the priesthood, he follows the Protestant usage in which one can have a vocation to any profession. But his apparent vocation is a strange one, coming not from the Christian God, but rather from "a Sacred Being" whose proper name, or one of whose proper names, is "pyrites." The implicit theology seems either poly- or pantheistic, and either way, by the later Auden's lights, therefore idolatrous, if perhaps innocently so. As Auden reports elsewhere, in 1920 he went through a period of "religious *Schwärmerei*," but soon after the anecdote quoted above he "discovers he has lost his faith."<sup>18</sup> His mineralogical Sacred Being tempts Auden into poetry in part by making him, like Jones, unsuited for other subjects—though Auden's unsuitability is less an ineptitude than a misleading appearance of excellence, in the form of an Oxford scholarship.

So the stylistic coloring of these anecdotes differs well enough—what, then, is the point of juxtaposing them? It is not that Jones and Auden both regretted their pseudo-vocations; to the contrary, each placed a certain faith in the *felix culpa*, and the goal of these examinations of poetic conscience is not self-recrimination but self-understanding. What both poets share, rather, is a sense of the weightiness of their youthful decisions to become poets, combined with a religious skepticism about the propriety of that decision—whether it involved an unwarranted assertion of authority—and a feeling that, good or bad, it was taken in ignorance—they became

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. V:154.



poets not knowing what poets were. Both Jones and Auden are imagining their poetic calling less as a vocation than as an avocation, both in the sense of a distraction and diversion from gainful employment, and in the sense of a summons to answer for oneself before a higher court. The answer required by the poetic judge is simultaneously ethical, a matter of justifying one's poems, those apparently aimless actions, and theoretical, a matter of explaining what these apparently aimless actions are and are for; and, above all, it is poetic, since any answer must be in the form of a poem.

This imagining of poetry as an avocation permeates Jones and Auden's later critical writing. It helps us, for one thing, to understand the sense in which each poet understands poems to be rituals, since for neither poet do these rituals, as they did for Stephen Daedalus (if not for Joyce himself), take the place of the Christian liturgy. Auden associates his "sacred beings" with the ritual nature of poems in "Making, Knowing, Judging," his 1956 inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, the last few pages of which he described as a "literary dogmatic psalm."<sup>19</sup> His central claim runs as follows:

The impulse to create a work of art is felt when, in certain persons, the passive awe provoked by sacred beings or events is transformed into a desire to express that awe in a rite of worship or homage, and to be fit homage, this rite must be beautiful. This rite has no magical or idolatrous intention; nothing is expected in return.<sup>20</sup>

When a late modernist poet says that poetry has something to do with ritual, it is hardly surprising, indicating only that they have read Eliot's footnotes to *The Waste Land*. But the way Auden specifies the claim, particularly in the second sentence, is not particularly Eliotic. First, Auden insists that the rite is not magical, which is to say it effects nothing, has no use. It is not

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<sup>19</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

an act of the calculative intellect, but is what Auden elsewhere calls “gratuitous.”<sup>21</sup> Second, the rite is not idolatrous, which is to say it is not a substitute for monotheistic religion, a distinction Auden elsewhere draws explicitly: “Catharsis is properly effected not by works of art, but by religious rites.”<sup>22</sup> The artistic rite may be inspired by the sacred, but itself is merely beautiful. It is an act of the “Secondary Imagination.”<sup>23</sup> Such Coleridgean vocabulary is rather alien to the usual language of modernist criticism.

Similar terms do, however, govern Jones’s essay “Art and Sacrament,” first published a year before Auden’s lecture (and written at the same time as Jones’s autobiographical talk). The title, to begin with, suggests an analogy between poet and priest—but what does Jones make of that analogy? He begins by arguing that “It is the intransitiveness and gratuity in man’s art that is the sign of man’s uniqueness,”<sup>24</sup> which is to say in slightly different words what Auden meant in saying that “nothing is expected in return.” To be gratuitous is to be superfluous, unnecessary; to be intransitive is to be directed at itself as its own end, the way one does not seek happiness for any further purpose but just in order to be happy. That these are the “sign” of human uniqueness means, for Jones, that they are significant of something, and so are sacraments: “man is unavoidably a sacramentalist and that his works are sacramental in character.”<sup>25</sup> Any artwork, in other words, is also a rite. But this is “sacrament” with a lower-case “s,” quite distinct from “the Sacrament” of Christian faith, although analogous to it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 163.

While religious Sacraments forgive sins and make God really present, artistic sacraments instead make present “beauty,” that is, in Jones’s scholastic definition, “a reality which, having been seen, has pleased.”<sup>27</sup> Jones defines this achievement of beauty as the purpose of all art: “Poussin said [...] ‘The goal of painting is delight.’ And this is universally true of all art.”<sup>28</sup> Art does nothing useful, in a profane or a religious sense, but it constitutes a ritual whose beauty delights.

At this point in the argument two questions arise. First, what is the nature of this delightful beauty which poetry achieves? Second, what about beauty justifies poetry in the face of its inutility for both profane and religious ends? Auden often raises the second question explicitly, as in the concluding paragraph of his essay “Writing,” which begins:

The condition of mankind is, and always has been, so miserable and depraved that, if anyone were to say to the poet: “For God’s sake stop singing and do something useful like putting on the kettle or fetching bandages,” what just reason could he give for refusing?<sup>29</sup>

The question draws our attention to the ethical implications of Auden’s uncompromising theory of poetry’s uselessness: is not art a pointless distraction? It also alludes to the fact, by now a crucial component in Auden’s public persona, of his disillusioning experience as a Republican volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. But the paragraph continues in a more imaginative vein:

But nobody says this. The self-appointed unqualified nurse says: “You are to sing the patient a song which will make him believe that I, and I alone, can cure him. If you can’t or won’t, I shall confiscate your passport and send you to the mines.” And the poor patient in his delirium cries: “Please sing me a song which will give me sweet dreams instead of nightmares. If you succeed, I will give you a penthouse in New York or a ranch in Arizona.”

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>29</sup> Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand*, 17.

Auden insists that poetry not act on either the imperative or the imprecation: as he says earlier on the page, the only “ulterior purpose” of poetry, if it can be said to have one at all (about which he seems doubtful), is, “by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate.” His ability to imagine these scenes does not tell us anything about Auden’s life or about the nature of art in general, but it does tell us something about Auden’s art—namely, that it contains such totalitarian nightmares and American sweet dreams. When we think of poetic beauty, Auden wants us to think about about how it compels us, in vain, to ask such things of it, and how it then frustrates our expectations, remaining insistently only its useless self.

One gets a similar sense from the end of Jones’s “Art and Sacrament,” in a passage which hovers between philosophy, history, poetic expansiveness, and poetic vulnerability. Throughout the essay Jones has used the intentionally provocative example of the art of military strategy,<sup>30</sup> a choice which places in stark relief Jones’s overarching assertion of art’s inherent independence from moral concerns, and also inescapably reminds us that the defining experience of Jones’s life was his time in the trenches of the Great War. The reminder is even stronger in Jones’s postscript to the essay, titled “The Utile,” where he declares that “The artist in man is the infantryman in man.”<sup>31</sup> Whether the artist’s work has a social function, good or evil, is not his concern; he deals only with the perfection of the work itself. All the more striking, then, given these disavowals of political responsibility, when “Art and Sacrament” concludes by requiring of the would-be contemporary poet “that conviction which strips off all defensive armour, so that the sharp contradictions and heavy incongruities may at least be

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<sup>30</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 159.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

felt.”<sup>32</sup> Is the artist in question here still an infantryman? If so, he is the infantryman who has stepped back from the battle, not because he remains impersonally aloof from the cultural situation, but because refraining from active engagement allows him to feel the pain of the situation even more strongly. Like Auden, Jones suggests that poetry has something to do with truth, but also that poetry does not achieve this relationship with truth by pursuing any particular goal. Rather, poetry makes itself vulnerable so as to feel the sharply contradictory purposes we imagine for it.

What we find in these vignettes is not a reasoned justification for the poet’s decision to refrain from offering practical assistance. Rather, we get a mythical account of the poet’s turn from effective tool toward gratuitous artwork, a turn which purports to be in some sense more truthful. Art began, for both Jones and Auden, with the first tool-maker who cared about the beauty of his tool beyond what was necessary for the tool to perform its mundane task. At most times and in most places, however, the gratuitous and the effective can exist in harmony, such that the carpenter, the soldier, and the priest are also all artists, in this naive sense. When the gratuitous and the effective come apart, as they do, according to Jones and Auden, in modern technocracies generally, and specifically in their own experiences of technological warfare, it becomes more and more difficult to remain a simple craftsman. The poet must reflect explicitly on the choice he faces: to become either no artist at all, or an artist above all else; to abandon beauty, or to turn away, unjustifiably, from what is practical. The vignettes just discussed depict that moment of turning, and depict it as beautiful, not despite, but because of its inefficaciousness.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 178.

The beauty of the poet's refusal of efficacious action is neither that of formal patterning nor that of erotic attraction, but rather that of peaceful vulnerability. It is of crucial importance that the activities from which Jones's and Auden's poets refrain are not simply humanitarian endeavors like building houses and digging wells. Bandages and armor both counteract the violence humans inflict on one another by covering up the victim. Neither Jones nor Auden opposes such ameliorative endeavors, but both suggest that poetry operates otherwise. The bystander who knows he should fetch bandages for the wounded, but nevertheless feels called to sing, or the soldier who knows he should protect himself and his comrades, but nevertheless feels called to remove his armor, are not described as the moral monsters we might otherwise imagine them to be. We see them as both pathetic in their indecision, their uncertainty as to the rectitude of their endeavor, and beautiful in their vulnerability, their willingness to expose themselves to judgment. This is not to say that Jones's or Auden's poetry was confessional in the usual sense—it would be difficult to confuse either with, say, Robert Lowell. Both believed that art was not self-expressive, but rather a representation of some honorable reality. But for both, the highest such reality which poetry could represent while remaining poetry, rather than liturgy, was the human person, and in particular the human person's capacity for such imaginative appreciation. Poetry, unlike carpentry, is the art of being human.

Jones dramatizes poetry's suspension between carpentry and liturgy in an autobiographical anecdote written near the end of his life but dealing with his experiences during the Great War. This passage is often noted for what it says about Jones's first exposure to Catholicism, and I do not mean to deny its place in his conversion narrative. I would suggest, however, that the passage also has much to say about the place of the poet *qua* poet even after

the conversion of the human being. The setting is on the Western Front, but not yet in the trenches; Jones has wandered away from his company and come across an apparently abandoned barn which he hopes to dismantle for firewood. He then looks through a crack in the wall:

But what I saw through the small gap in the wall was not the dim emptiness I had expected but the back of a sacerdos in a gilt-hued planeta, two points of flickering candle-light no doubt lent an extra sense of goldness to the vestment & a golden warmth seemed, by the same agency, to lend the white altar-cloths and the white linen of the celebrant's alb & amice & maniple (the latter, I notice, has been abandoned, without a word of explanation, by these blasted reformers). You can imagine what a great marvel it was for me to see through that chink in the wall, and kneeling in the hay beneath the improvised *mensa* were a few huddled figures in khaki [...] I can't recall at what point of the Mass it was as I looked through that squint-hole and I didn't think I ought to stay long as it seemed rather like an uninitiated bloke prying on the Mysteries of a Cult. But it made a big impression on me. For one thing I was astonished how close to the Front Line the priest had decided to make the Oblation and I was also impressed to see Old Sweat Mulligan, a somewhat fearsome figure, a real pugilistic, hard-drinking Goidelic Celt, kneeling there in the smokey candlelight. And one strong impression I had [...] I felt immediately the oneness between the Offerant and those toughs that clustered round him in the dim-lit byre—a thing I had never felt remotely as a Protestant at the Office of Holy Communion in spite of the insistence of Protestant theology on the “priesthood of the laity.”<sup>33</sup>

Auden, too, in his autobiographical essay “Modern Canterbury Pilgrims,” places the seed of his conversion in a scene involving poet, priest, religious ritual, and, in the background, war—although what Auden encounters is rather that ritual's absence. This scene takes place during the Spanish Civil War; Auden had traveled to Spain to help the Communists (though they did not have much use for him):

On arriving in Barcelona, I found as I walked through the city that all the churches were closed and there was not a priest to be seen. To my astonishment, this discovery left me profoundly shocked and disturbed. The feeling was far too intense to be the result of a mere liberal dislike of intolerance, the notion that it is wrong to stop people from doing

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<sup>33</sup> Jones, *The Dying Gaul* 249.

what they like, even if it is something silly like going to church. I could not escape acknowledging that, however I had consciously ignored and rejected the Church for sixteen years, the existence of churches and what went on in them had all the time been very important to me. If that was the case, then what then?<sup>34</sup>

More than the avocational passages discussed earlier, these scenes admirably exemplify Jones and Auden's distinctive prose styles. Jones' account is full of precise and even pedantic physical description and of historical-theological digressions (I have omitted the longest of these). They add up to an allegorical argument—the light shining unexpectedly in darkness; the small religious congregation united in ritual action while beset on all sides by conditions of war, equated with conditions of iconoclasm in the phrase “blasted reform”; the artist gathering material to make his own light and excluded from the greater light of the ritual even as he recognizes its significance. The highly wrought description highlights the gap between Jones' experience at the time, which lasted only a few moments, and the weight of interpretation he now forces it to bear.

Auden's version, in contrast, is not a story of something happening all of a sudden, but a story of something *not* happening. To avoid implying that his realization was occasioned by any particularly forceful experience, he plays down any hint of violence, not mentioning that at least some of the churches were closed because they were destroyed, and the priests were unseen because all those not in hiding had been killed. As with Jones, physical and social suffering are elided into one another. Auden's narrative hews closely to the texture of immediate perception (or lack thereof), and for that very reason its meaning remains opaque. He suspends any elaboration on the significance of, as he vaguely terms it, “what went on in them.” In so doing

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<sup>34</sup> Auden, *Prose* III:578.



Auden lends the phrase an additional weight which suggests that Christian rituals, that is, what the priests did in the churches, were “very important” to him not despite, but because, having ignored and rejected them, he did not consciously understand them.

This implicit emphasis on ritual points toward the key similarity between these two passages, which lies in what we might call their geometry. Both passages place surprising emphasis on the role of the priest, set apart from the congregation but thereby more closely united to them. For Jones, it is the *difference* between “the Offerant and those toughs that clustered round him” that allows for the “oneness” the rite enacts between them, and potentially Jones also. For Auden, it is not the closure of the churches but the specific absence of the priests that forces him to feel religious goings-on to be more than merely “people [...] doing what they like,” and so somehow unconsciously “important” even to Auden. Further, both passages place the poet in a peculiar position relative to priest and congregation both. The poet stands apart from congregation, not because he is before an altar, but because he is outside the church altogether, fascinated by but also excluded from the liturgical scene, aimlessly walking around the city or stopping to peek through a chink in the wall.

I take this geometry to lie at the heart of both Jones’s and Auden’s religious conversions. For Jones, the visible difference between priest and congregation reveals the inadequacy of the Protestant doctrine of the “priesthood of the laity,” which makes everyone a priest, subjectively speaking, at the cost of not letting anyone be someone else’s priest in an objective sense. For Auden, similarly, the visible absence of priests (while the remainder of the congregation is, presumably, still invisibly present) reveals that priestly actions matter whether or not one thinks about them; one does not have the option of liberally tolerating them. These realizations both

center on a theological principle: *ex opere operato Christi*, meaning that sacraments derive their power not from the celebrant himself but from Christ acting through him. The priest is able to unite the congregation with his liturgical actions because, in a certain theological sense, he is not the one acting—he acts *in persona Christi*.

These scenes were pivotal in these poets' conversions because they suggested new ways to understand poetic activity—but not in the way one might expect. Both Jones and Auden thought that poems have a certain objective reality, analogous to the objective reality of a sacrament. The analogy is misleading, though, if we ignore that reality's source. In the case of the sacrament, it comes from Christ. Neither Jones nor Auden imagined that the poet could, like the priest, act *in persona Christi*, and so take his rightful place on the altar before a subservient congregation. As if to head off any such suggestion, Auden went so far as to describe priests as almost the opposite of skilled artists: "Like some mass-produced utensil, any priest is interchangeable with any other."<sup>35</sup> Neither, however, could the poet simply take his place among the congregation, participating vicariously in the priest's *in-persona-Christi* actions. Such participation would not call for anything besides attention. The poets remain on the threshold, not yet entering the church, because the reality of poetry resides elsewhere. Auden often attributes this reality to the poetic gift, while Jones uses even more romantic language: "By the particular workings of [for example] Hogarth's genius a reality is offered to us."<sup>36</sup> I take the key words here to be the adjective "particular" and the article "a." Hogarth's paintings are particular to Hogarth, and represent not the reality already known but a reality

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. III:204.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 175.

newly encountered. Unlike the Christ-personating priest, the poet who writes *in propria persona* cannot take for granted that the new reality of his work will be recognized. Neither can he imagine that its recognition bears the same religious significance as does the recognition of sacramental efficacy.

A word on how I have been reading both these scenes of liturgical overhearing, and the earlier scenes of youthful avocation. In each of these cases, an allegedly historical incident provided a metapoetic image for the poet's place relative to his religious obligations. The same could be said about how I have approached these authors' theoretical writings: what these authors intended as abstract claims about the nature of poetry I have taken for poetic evocations demonstrating the value of poetry's self-limitations. I justify my procedure on the grounds that Jones and Auden were neither historians nor philosophers, but poets. The justification for this book's comparison of Jones and Auden lies, similarly, not in their theoretical claims (however interesting those might be) or in the ways they organized their life histories (however interesting *those* might be), but in the interlocking images with which they defined the poet's role: the poet as exiled wanderer—the poet as exposed soldier—the poet as superfluous ritualist—the poet as misguided devotee, conflating the beauty of the world with the voice of God. It will be the contention of this book that these shared poetic images point to a deeper shared understanding—though still a *poetic* understanding—of the authority of the poet and of the purpose of poetry, and, further, that these resemblances are not accidental—they cry out for an explanation.

One last question, then, must be answered before our inquiry proper can begin: what kind of account are we looking for? If we asked Auden, always over-generous in

acknowledging his sources, he would likely point us to the long list of critical and poetic predecessors he and Jones shared, from Shakespeare and Coleridge down to T. S. Eliot. Jones, prickly on the subject of any influence not his own, might have waved away the question with a vaguely worded appeal to the “particular historical complex,” the “cultural or civilizational situation,” both he and Auden inhabited.<sup>37</sup> Such genealogical and contextual explanations certainly have their uses for understanding each poet separately. For present purposes, however, they are unhelpfully general, failing to specify why the resemblance would obtain between these poets *as opposed to* their myriad contemporaries. The account we seek must be more specific. To explain the similarities between Jones’s and Auden’s artistic theories requires appealing to similarities between the particular routes by which they arrived there.

As one might expect, those routes can be reduced neither to philosophy nor to history. Jones and Auden’s biographies do have certain features in common, as we have already seen: both decided relatively young to become professional artists; both were personally involved in the violent conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century; and both converted to Christianity, in part as a result of that involvement. Other minor resemblances will crop up as the argument progresses (including, for each poet, a failed engagement and a fraught fraternal relationship). But in other ways Jones and Auden were almost opposites: Jones rarely traveled, and by the end of his life was a recluse, only peripherally involved in the cultural life of London; Auden moved between England, New York, Italy, and Austria, and was a prolific book

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 116. The topic of influence came up in one of the few epistolary exchanges between Jones and Auden. Auden asked about Jones and Ezra Pound; Jones responded that “critics tend always to suppose some *direct* influence which, on examination, often happens not to be true. *Indirectly* of course anything can happen—but then that’s only the *Zeitgeist* (if that’s the right word).” Letter to W. H. Auden, 25 February 1954, Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, 160

reviewer and lecturer. Moreover, though both thought in explicitly Christian terms and placed great emphasis on the Incarnation, they otherwise lived in wildly different thought-worlds: Jones's mind was saturated in post-Impressionist art and neoscholasticism; Auden's, in Romantic poetry and post-Hegelianism. I will not belabor the point: Jones and Auden did not live or think alike.

Nevertheless, this book will contend, they did *make* alike—not in the sense that their individual works bear stylistic similarities, but in the sense that their respective oeuvres trace similar patterns of artistic development. Each over the first two decades of his career was responding to a poetics—in a phrase, the poetics of British high modernism—inhabitable to the poetry which seemed to him most urgently necessary. The high modernists were right, Jones and Auden thought, to see art as a ritual, but wrong to infer that this ritual imposed a quasi-religious order on a threateningly chaotic world of ordinary experience. Each sought to avoid the violence of such an imposition by working out a theoretical understanding of poetry as a gratuitous, peaceful, and beautiful rite, and, at the same time, by discovering a form of poetic imagination which could embody that understanding. The emphasis throughout this book will be on the latter of these achievements, for as it turns out, their separate quests led Jones and Auden each to make poetic works which were, in both style and structure, quite peculiar, and, again, peculiarly similar to one another. These peculiarities cropped up from the beginning of their careers, but reached their apex with Jones's mid-career masterpiece *In Parenthesis*, and with Auden's similarly central "The Sea and the Mirror." The peculiar structures of Jones and Auden's midcareer masterpieces are what make their anxieties about the poet's authority important to the history of modernism.

## 2. Jones, Auden, and Modern Poetry

That Jones and Auden taken individually are central to the history of British modernism will be news to some, but not to all. It is worth remarking here that critical reception of both David Jones and W.H. Auden has suffered from an incongruity between general and specialist assessments, an incongruity not unique in kind but nevertheless in these two cases unusually severe. Many scholars of modernism take for granted that, while Jones may have written the best book-length work about the Great War, his later work is obscure and unrewarding, and that, while Auden may have briefly lent his name to a generation, after his move to America he quickly descended into uninteresting eccentricity. At the same time, both figures boast a number of apologists—or perhaps the proper word is “devotees.” These poets of sacred realities have become, for some of their readers, sacred realities themselves, worthy not only of having their significance somewhat exaggerated, but of being elevated into the most important Anglophone poet of the twentieth century.

In brief, Jones and Auden both can often appear to be all-or-nothing propositions, requiring either immediate rejection or long-term discipleship. Thomas Dilworth, for example, has spent the better part of four decades writing about Jones, while Edward Mendelson has spent a similar amount of time as Auden’s literary executor. The claims each makes for his respective protagonist are peculiar, and peculiarly alike, in two related ways. First, they tend to assert the importance, not of those works that already command general respect, but of the protagonist’s later creations—of whose very existence most non-specialists are only dimly aware—which become *magna opera* beside which the earlier work appears mere prelude. Second, the importance of these later works is located specifically in the author’s response to

the problems of literary modernism, to which the author is alleged to have given the unique and uniquely correct solution.

These solutions each have simultaneously a formal, a personal, and a political component. For Dilworth, Jones solves the problem of modernist fragmentation, both of the artwork and of the worldview. He “takes literary modernism beyond irony,”<sup>38</sup> not into subjective sincerity but into objective reality; at the same time, he “combine[s] extensive (previously American) modernist ‘open form’ with structural unity.”<sup>39</sup> Dilworth makes the former claim specifically for *In Parenthesis* and the latter specifically for Jones’s second book, *The Anathemata*, but he also intends them to describe Jones’s achievement as a whole, as we can see in the closing words of Dilworth’s biography:

A brilliant visual artist, the best modern native British poet, and the author of an original and convincing theory of culture, David Jones may be the foremost native British modernist. He created so much intelligent beauty during so many decades of psychological distress, that his creative life is probably the greatest existential achievement of international modernism.<sup>40</sup>

The formal and the personal achievements here are logically but not actually separable: Jones’s self-overcoming just is, for Dilworth, an exemplary instance of modernist form-making,<sup>41</sup> exemplary because it manages to unite beauty, that is, structural unity, with moral intelligence, that is, openness, being beyond but not ignorant of irony. Out of modernist disintegration both Jones the poet and Jones’s poetry arrive at an architectonic form that can hold together what seems insoluble. That holding together is achieved through a theory of culture that is

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<sup>38</sup> Dilworth, *David Jones*, 191.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>41</sup> An instance, even, of “spatial form,” though not in Joseph Frank’s sense of the phrase (cf. *The Idea of Spatial Form*)

“convincing,” which is to say, in Dilworth’s estimation, correct, and in its correctness a contribution to the public good. Since the author has provided the ideal theoretical account of his own work, the critic’s primary task is one of explication.

In his two-volume biography Mendelson emphasizes a similar theoretical ascent from the abyss on the part of Auden. The terms of praise are similarly exalted: for Mendelson, Auden “became the most inclusive poet of the twentieth century, its most technically skilled, and its most truthful.”<sup>42</sup> These words, though from the first volume, nevertheless point forward to the later Auden whose work the early Auden unconsciously anticipates. (The second volume of the biography is almost twice as long as the first.) Mendelson’s Auden spends the first two decades of his career shedding the modernist paradigm of poet as an ironic prophet crying out in the desert in favor of the poet as anonymous builder of the city. What he builds is open without being chaotic and ordered without being oppressive:

An aesthetically tolerant reader who wants to defer the second question [“What kind of guy inhabits this poem?”] while enjoying the pleasurable difficulties of the first [“How does the poem work?”] is made uncomfortable by the moral intelligence of [Auden’s] poems, by their transformation from a beautiful picture into an unflattering mirror. A morally censorious reader who prefers to skip over the first question is scandalized by the poems’ self-delight, the pleasure they take in their bravura elegance of language and form. But to the reader willing to ask both questions, Auden’s poems offer responses that combine the consoling triumph of form with the disturbing uncertainties of freedom.<sup>43</sup>

The two questions to which Mendelson refers are Auden’s own; like Dilworth with Jones, Mendelson trusts Auden to explain to us his own poetry. The resulting explanation again has to do both with the personality of the poet and with the freedom of the reader; the open

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<sup>42</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.



relationship between them must move beyond mere beauty or empty irony. But this freedom is somehow intimately related to literary form in the most literal sense, the patterns in the arrangement of words and the delight we take in them.

Like most who write about Jones I have learned much from Dilworth,<sup>44</sup> and like most who write about Auden I have learned much from Mendelson.<sup>45</sup> But I also find sobering a point made in Geoffrey Hill's review of Mendelson's first volume, which applies equally to Dilworth's work: "a mass of explication may in fact impede clear definition and accurate distinction." It can impede them above all by suggesting the presence of more worth explicating than is really there:

It is not Professor Mendelson's fault that, in our pushing, inflationary age of "exclusive rights" and "definitive" assessments, the broker [which is to say, the critic concerned with a particular poet] has emerged as a cultural power, creating a climate in which each new claim must be staked in terms increasingly solipsistic and grandiose.<sup>46</sup>

The critical grandiosity and the critical solipsism, Hill is suggesting, go together: when we spend more and more time explicating a single author, we lose track of how that author's achievement actually relates to the broader literary landscape, becoming mired in the mass of language with which the author justified to himself his own project in essays and letters. What a critic can do to counteract this tendency toward myopia it is a difficult question, and an

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<sup>44</sup> Of numerous subsidiary works, sharing a common spirit with Dilworth even if differing at points, two are worth particular mention here: Staudt, *At the Turn of A Civilization*, which emphasizes the theological dimensions of the poetry, and Bankes and Hills, *The Art of David Jones*, an account focused on the visual art.

<sup>45</sup> Other helpful books in the Mendelsonian vein include Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan? Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry*, about Auden's turn against Romanticism; Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, about Auden's existential theology; and Arana, *W. H. Auden's Poetry*, about the poetry of his final decade.

<sup>46</sup> Hill, "Review of Edward Mendelson, Early Auden."

instructive one.

We should notice first that the danger cannot be avoided through a heightened skepticism, for a hermeneutic of suspicion will tend simply to invert appearances according to well-known rubrics. We can see this in the symptomatic readings that have been offered of Jones and Auden. There has been a long tradition of suspecting the later Auden of failures of self-theorizing. Reviewing Auden's 1960 volume *Homage to Clio*, for example, Philip Larkin put his finger on Auden's departure for America on the eve of the Second World War: "At one stroke he lost his key subject and emotion—Europe and the fear of war—and abandoned his audience together with their common dialect and concerns."<sup>47</sup> For Larkin, Auden's poetic genius required him to feel a certain way about his political situation, and by achieving political circumstances in which he would not feel that way, he lost the requisite inner drive to poetry. Larkin recognizes that all this was no accident, but does not much enter into Auden's reasons for the shift, and for this reason Auden's partisans dismiss his concerns for failing to recognize what Auden was attempting. Lucy McDiarmid does enter into such reasons, while retaining a fruitful suspicion of their validity, making her book the most valuable act of suspicion available. For McDiarmid, the later Auden came to see art as incorrigibly narcissistic, and so sought to create art whose main purpose was to express its awareness of its own incorrigibility and deny itself the higher purpose it desired. If this began as a quest of self-purification, it wound up with Auden sounding "smugly pleased with the refinements of his own civilization, and not too preoccupied by ethical or spiritual matters."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Larkin, "What's Become of Wystan?"

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, 7.

What the best of these “suspicious” accounts have in common is a simultaneous attention to the political and the psychological—unsurprisingly, perhaps, for Auden, given his documented interest in both Marx and Freud. The more obscure Jones shared this interest in psychoanalytic and anti-capitalist thinking (though he favored a somewhat nostalgic distributism), but unfortunately the suspicion cast in his direction—and there has been less of it—has tended to focus exclusively on one or the other. An early study by Elizabeth Ward attacked Jones’s cultural theorizing as confusedly reactionary: because he is unable to issue more than vague indictments of ‘technocracy,’ both his poetry and prose “tend to become at once abstract and self-referring under the pressures of ideology,” and to suffer from “repetitiveness and eccentricity.”<sup>49</sup> While Ward’s book has not been well received by readers of Jones, it remains a valuable aid to piercing through the hagiographic haze enveloping him. Similarly helpful for that purpose is Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel’s study of Jones’s visual art, which attacks his later work for accumulating detail without adding up to significant form. They offer an intriguing, if ultimately reductionist, psychoanalytic interpretation of this failure: “By the late thirties, there was a tendency for Jones’s painting to be either an expression of his repressed sexuality or a vehicle for his ideas and philosophy.”<sup>50</sup> Jones’s art, in other words (and in words that might just as well have applied to Auden’s), declined because it grew politically and personally self-indulgent, lacking the more fraught relationship to biographical and historical context that had been the genius of the earlier work.

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<sup>49</sup> Ward, *David Jones Myth-Maker*, 222.

<sup>50</sup> Miles and Shiel, *David Jones*, 292.

To be sure, such “suspicious” readings as the above offer valuable insight into their subjects. But however ideologically or psychoanalytically deep they might go, their suspicious attitude makes it difficult for them to be any more poetically sophisticated than the canonizing readings they seem to oppose. My objection is not that suspicious readings are uncharitable (though they can be this as well).<sup>51</sup> Rather, it is that both kinds of reading depend on a romantic view of poetic inspiration as an instinctive reaction against external pressures. They differ only in which half of the equation they emphasize. When they emphasize the reaction, they make poetry out to be more autonomous than it really is, ignoring the way in which books are made of and in response to other books. When they emphasize the pressures, they underestimate poetry’s autonomy, flattening poetry’s relationship to its contexts from one of reason to one of reflex, such that the only ideas worth discussing in relation to poetry are non-poetic ones. Either way, they misconstrue the autonomy of poetry to be a matter of physical force (which side of the equation will turn out to be the weightier?). We ought rather to say that the autonomy of poetry lies in how the poet consciously intends one particular thing as opposed to the other things he might have intended. We avoid excessive solipsism by making comparisons and drawing distinctions between poets, especially between apparently similar ones; we avoid excessive suspicion by tracing back what the author has done, not to irrational motives, but to the author’s poetic intentions.

Such is the approach I take in the present book. I do not trace a common unconscious or ideological theme running through a range of British modernists; rather, I assert that two poets

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<sup>51</sup> Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading* argues intelligently for the importance of charitable reading against both suspicion and solipsism.

chose the same response to an aesthetic problem. For this reason my method of comparison somewhat differs from that of many critical projects. My focus is always binocular, and indeed stereoscopic: I am engaged in an experiment to see how far one can get by looking at these two poets' oeuvres *as if* they were the work of a single author, on the hypothesis that the answer is "quite far" (though of course not "all the way"—while I will not emphasize the differences between them, I will often point them out, and they are in many cases of great significance). At the same time, and indeed just because I am making an argument about how Jones's and Auden's poetics are unusually similar, I make extensive reference to other authors, seeking to show how the kinship I identify is not merely a question of a common historical genus.

My engagement with these touchstones is to some extent consciously non-methodical. For example, I do not confine myself to "Jones's Shakespeare" or "Auden's Shakespeare," if by those phrases we mean the pictures of Shakespeare that we can explicitly base in Jones or Auden's theoretical writings, but neither do I engage extensively with the vast scholarly literature on the bard. Rather, I attempt imaginatively to reconstruct interpretations which seem sympathetic with what Jones or Auden did write, and which also seem critically plausible and fruitful. This does not, however, mean that I am only interested in these other poets, and, more generally, in Jones and Auden's literary context, for the light they shed on Jones and Auden. On several questions I aim to enter into wider conversations about British high modernism and about modernist poetry in general, and to suggest that Jones and Auden should play a more central role in these conversations than they have until now.

The first such conversation worth mentioning here concerns the category of war poetry. It might seem strange to bring Jones and Auden together under this heading: Jones would seem

to belong in a study of literal soldiers of the Great War such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, which focuses on the trauma of war, while Auden would seem to belong in a study of the inter-war generation such as Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation*, which explores the feeling of having missed out on the excitement. Much recent scholarship, however, has been devoted to expanding our sense of the term "war poetry," emphasizing that all writing during the Great War and in the interwar period registered to some degree war's psychological effects.<sup>52</sup> I find expanding the category in this way helpful for understanding Jones and Auden, particularly in how it offers an opportunity to refactor the category's constitutive elements. Helpful as it may be to categorize poets by their positions relative to particular wars, it is equally important to understand them in terms of their differing approaches to the very idea of war poetry. Jones and Auden, I will argue, were both a specific kind of war poet, and one which fits only with difficulty into the frameworks mentioned above. Fussell finds in war poetry an alienated irony, but cannot fit Jones's subtlety into his scheme, and so deems him a failed romantic. Hynes takes Auden's name for his title, but also recognizes Auden as the author who most fully escaped the cliché of the "thirties poet" who engages politically as recompense for his failure to be born early enough to fight. This is so, I argue, because (as we saw above) each of these poets emphasized not so much poetry's registering of psychological effects as its

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<sup>52</sup> One book in this vein I've found particularly helpful is Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*, which delves deeply into the British high modernists who did not fight, principally Pound, Eliot, and Woolf, to show how the war subtly but crucially shifted their sense of modernist language. Two historical studies offering pan-European perspectives are also worth mentioning: Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, which emphasizes how the ironies the war "unleashed" were in fact already present in the pre-war avant-garde, and Marsland, *The Nation's Cause*, which emphasizes how, considered in quantitative terms, most of the Great War poetry was (1) written by civilians, not soldiers, and (2) politically diverse, but far from aesthetically avant-garde.

peculiar responsiveness-without-a-response to war's ethical quandaries. Jones and Auden were war poets who did not think poetry could do anything about war.

For both Jones and Auden, to write poems about war is to write poetry that is secular, not in the sense of rejecting religion, but in the sense of concerning itself with the present age, the present *saeculum*, and the way it does or does not break with ages past. The second scholarly conversation to which this project speaks concerns the relationship between modernism and religion. The secularization thesis has for some years now been out of favor, and modernist studies have since witnessed a "religious turn." Often, as suggested by the title of one of the turn's standard-bearers, Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, the focus has been on how religion shapes modernism, such that modernist poets can transform but not shed entirely religious forms of life. Jones and Auden, however, were far from subconscious Christians, and my interest in the religious commitments of these and adjacent poets has less to do with their experiences or habits than with their concepts, particularly with how their theological and poetic ideas interacted. One way in which such an interest can be cashed out is in close attention to an author's reading in academic theology and its influence on his work, but this is not my approach. While I have benefited from several such studies of Jones and Auden,<sup>53</sup> my focus in what follows will be rather on the poetry itself. I am interested above all in how these committed Christian poets try to carve out a space for poetry apart from—but still compatible with—religious faith.

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<sup>53</sup> I have found particularly helpful three books in particular, Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, Soud, *Divine Cartographies*, and Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period*, which together make up a kind of survey of the field: no one poet receives a chapter in all three, but Jones, Auden, Yeats, and Eliot each receive one in two of them.

The chief way in which Jones and Auden achieve this separate peace I have already sketched above: through a poetics of ritual which is not meaning-making and does not attempt to justify itself, but rather offers gratuitous, vulnerable beauty. They arrived at this distinctive poetic self-understanding within a specific literary-historical context; to take a wide view (as is done too rarely in writing about Jones and Auden), they did so within the later stages of pan-European modernism. Many modernists, beginning, as we usually tell the story, with Wagner, responded to the crisis of secularism by attempting to unify all of the arts into a total work of art that could provide a new basis for cultural unity.<sup>54</sup> Approaching Jones and Auden in terms of the modernist impulse toward *Gesamtkunstwerke* helps us to understand why Jones refused any clear demarcation between his work as poet and his work as painter and printmaker, and why Auden began his poetic career writing dramas and switched midway through to libretti. Each was committed, both theoretically and practically, to an understanding of poetry which encompassed not only lyric verse, but also carpentry, musical composition, and, most importantly, the combination of all three. But Jones and Auden came to modernism late in the game, at a time when the melodramatic totalizing of Wagnerian opera no longer seemed plausible; it had come to appear theatrical, in a negative sense, and in need of purification.<sup>55</sup> The British high modernists' attraction to the idea of poetic ritual was in part a means for such purification, hearkening back as it did to a mythical pre-modern moment of impersonal cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Two helpful recent books about this impulse are Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent* and Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*.

<sup>55</sup> The sense of such a need is as old as Wagnerian opera itself, as we see in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In my understanding of the post-Wagnerian dilemma I have been particularly influenced by the theoretical arguments of Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and Fried, "Art and Objecthood," and by the historical account of Puchner, *Stage Fright*.



unity. Which is to say that ritual, like impersonality itself, was a way of rooting their poetic authority in something that transcended the immediate cultural context.<sup>56</sup>

Such is the significance of ritual in the British modernists who most influenced Jones and Auden—but it is *not* its significance in Jones and Auden themselves. Scholarship about Jones has, unfortunately, tended to elide the ways in which his sense of poetic ritual is personal and non-authoritative, making him into an exemplar of the modernist will to ritual in its purest form.<sup>57</sup> (Since scholarly conversations about modernist ritual and impersonality are among the only ones that regularly include Jones as a major figure, this omission has likely contributed to Jones’s obscurity.) Writing about Auden has a better track record of differentiating him from other British high modernists—Mendelson, for example, suggests that Auden is more like Brecht than Eliot.<sup>58</sup> Still, I think, Auden criticism has frequently misunderstood his approach to poetic ritual. Auden has often been seen as a deconstructive epilogue, adopting Yeats’ and

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<sup>56</sup> That impersonality is an aesthetic achievement, not a natural feature of poetic works, I take for granted. Two helpful, quite different recent books about the reasons a poet might desire an impersonal effect are Warren, *Fables of the Self* and Cameron, *Impersonality*. For Warren, it is a question of how to find the self into the work without veering into the confessional; for Cameron, it is one of violently making nonsense of the author’s personality so as to make contact with impersonal reality. Two good books on poetic authority in general are Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* and Hallberg, *Lyric Power*. Von Hallberg describes the “vatic” or “orphyic” mode as one of many of poetry’s sources of power. Longenbach argues more subtly that all poetic power derives from its suspicion of and resistance to itself.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Korg, *Ritual and Experiment in Modern Poetry*, which connects the impersonality of ritual with the impersonality of experiment, and Query, *Ritual and the Idea of Europe in Interwar Writing*, which connects it with the impersonality of a transcendent cultural ideal (Europe). Both devote a chapter to Jones’s later work *The Anathemata* and find it—I think implausibly—a paradigmatic expression of the modernist ideal of comprehensively meaning-making ritual. Query, I should note, also has a helpful chapter on Auden.

<sup>58</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 10.

Eliot's techniques of ritual impersonality only to prove their authoritative claims fallacious.<sup>59</sup> But Auden's rejection of modernist pretension does not eliminate ritual so much as transform it. For both Jones and Auden, I suggest, ritual was central, but it was a ritual less of impersonality, with the emphasis on the objective, than of anonymity, with the emphasis on the self-abnegating. They sought to create, not impersonal art-objects that would orient the world around themselves, so much as exemplary displays of human intentionality, which is to say, of the human power to intend anything at all, abstracted from any particular object of intention.<sup>60</sup>

This final suggestion at least attempts to derive from the poetic works themselves, rather than fitting them to a Procrustean bed of theory. Skeptical readers will have noticed, however, that at least in the terms in which it is couched—above all, in its emphasis on “intention”—it does not derive from Jones and Auden's own language, but from some other as-yet-unspecified source. To anticipate slightly, I mean the word to evoke a way in which philosophers, particularly in the analytic tradition, have talked about works of art, as in Stanley Cavell's early observation that “one's subject, in art, is the intentionality of objects.”<sup>61</sup> But before describing my use of this tradition, and as a way of introducing it, I want briefly to discuss my reasons for

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<sup>59</sup> Three excellent and very different books about modernist impersonality and authority, all grouping Yeats, Eliot, and Auden together, are McDiarmid, *Saving Civilization*, McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, and Rosen, *Plain English*.

<sup>60</sup> Some readers will hear in the first half of this sentence an echo of Wallace Stevens's “Anecdote of the Jar,” how “it made the slovenly wilderness | Surround that hill” (Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 76). Others will perhaps be reminded of Martin Heidegger's claims about “The Origin of the Work of Art.” My focus for the remainder of this section will be on the second half of this sentence, the connection between art and intentionality. Without dismissing them as trivial, I do not want to linger too long over the alternative Stevens and Heidegger present. I find persuasive the claim (made regarding Heidegger in, for example, Pippin, *After the Beautiful*) that this alternative is ultimately irrational.

<sup>61</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 228.

adopting a critical language so alien to the objects of criticism—my reasons, in other words, for engaging in an act of metaphorical translation, rewriting a poem’s implicit picture of itself into terms the author did not and might never have endorsed.

The metaphor of translation is intended to suggest what it would mean to avoid both suspicion and solipsism. I have sympathies with the recent move away from “critique” toward “surface” reading,<sup>62</sup> but I find ultimately more compelling the argument that the very metaphor of surface versus depth leads to confusion (at least when its metaphorical status is forgotten; kept in check, the metaphor is often a useful one).<sup>63</sup> The metaphor of translation does, of course, have its limits. Even apart from the fact that translation itself is a theoretically vexed concept, it is difficult to make more than metaphorical sense of the word *language* when we speak of translating from “poetic language” to “critical.” But it has one significant advantage over that of depth: it captures our sense that what we interpret is not an object to be perceived, but rather a meaning, even if an embodied meaning, to be understood. In an interpretation, as in a translation, distortion is inevitable, but undesirable. At the same time, we have no expectation that the author will endorse, or even comprehend, what we come up with; translations are usually made into languages the original author does not know.<sup>64</sup> My goal, then, is to interpret, not Jones’s and Auden’s stated theories about art (although those theories may provide some insight into the objects of our investigation), but rather their artworks themselves,

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<sup>62</sup> On the limits of critique, see Rita Felski’s book of that name (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*). For an introduction to the idea of surface reading, see Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading.”

<sup>63</sup> On the limits of the metaphor, see Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

<sup>64</sup> My sense of what a theory of interpretation as translation might look like has been shaped above all by Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* and Davidson, “Radical Interpretation.”

insofar as *they* implicitly understand what it is to be an artwork, an author, an audience.

Another way of putting this would be that I am interested in how their poetic works attempt to acquire meaning, to mediate a communication between human persons.

Unfortunately, Jones's work has rarely been considered in term of its conception of meaning. A partial exception is Rowan Williams's account of Jones's debt to the neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain's book *Art and Scholasticism*.<sup>65</sup> Williams recognizes, as not all readers do, that Jones goes beyond Maritain in his quest to understand the significance of art, arriving at the view that the Catholic mass is, in Williams's words, "the place where the meaning of meaning is displayed."<sup>66</sup> But Williams still focuses only on the analogies Jones draws between eucharist and poem, leaving no room for a discussion of the difference between them. I will suggest that this difference is of paramount importance: if the work of the priest reveals for Jones the meaning of meaning, the work of the poet reveals something closer to the meaning of the latent possibility of meaning.

More has been done with Auden, in part because his greater prominence has led to more scholarship of the form "Auden-and-x." Two books are particularly worth mentioning, both in different ways about how the early Auden understood the relationship between poet and reader, though the relevance of personhood to poetry is only implicit in both. (Incidentally, each of these focuses more on the earlier Auden than is usual in Auden criticism. I will follow them in this, and do the same for Jones, whose early work, especially the visual art of the 1920s, has been somewhat neglected. It seems that these poets' early work is a less fruitful

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<sup>65</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 76.

subject for canonizing and skeptical readers alike.) The first book is Richard Bozorth's study of Auden and queer theory, interpreted as a skeptical approach to poetic epistemology. It shows how Auden's thought on the question evolved through a series of quasi-erotic metaphors: first "joke," then "parable," then "analogy," then "game."<sup>67</sup> Bonnie Costello, meanwhile, offers a philosophy-of-language-informed analysis of Auden's first-person pronouns, emphasizing how his lyrics are not self-absorbed but rather deeply concerned with the creation of community.<sup>68</sup>

I find both of these projects valuable for how they "translate" the early Auden's poetic thought to see how it intends and explores the possibility of intending a peculiar kind of communication, one which can evade the obstacles bedeviling ordinary, non-poetic speech. Jones, too, I would suggest, approaches his poetry with this goal in mind, and can be fruitfully understood with the aid of the same philosophical terminology. At the same time, Bozorth's and Costello's book both share, from my perspective, certain limitations. One could be described as tactical: both are concerned to show that Auden's poetry is in some sense exemplary. Bozorth sees him as a precursor to contemporary queer theory; Costello sees him as exemplifying twentieth century poetry's attitude to community. I proceed on the opposite hypothesis: what if, at least in some crucial respects, Auden's poetry differs significantly from the writing of his most famous contemporaries, and most closely resembles that of the more obscure Jones? Another limitation is conceptual: while both are concerned with how Auden understood knowledge to relate to community, neither puts much emphasis on his conception of that being which knows and enters into communal relations. Accordingly, neither draws a

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Costello, *The Plural of Us*.

connection between Auden's emphasis on a communication which communicates no content, and his sense of human being as a community to which we inescapably belong.

A better account of this intertwining presents itself in two recent monographs, not about Jones and Auden, but about poets closely adjacent to them. The first, Brett Bourbon's *Finding a Replacement for the Soul*, examines the relationship between literary meaning and personhood, focused on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's tantalizingly meaningless words invite interpretation as a kind of ascetic exercise: in trying, and failing, to make sense of what we hope can be more than letters on a page, we practice the art of making sense of ourselves as somehow more than meaningless things. The second book, Oren Izenberg's *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*, approaching the same problems as Bourbon's in a slightly more straightforward fashion, traces a modernist heritage, running through Yeats, George Oppen, Frank O'Hara, and the LANGUAGE poets, aimed not so much at writing poems, as at demonstrating the possibility of personhood, and to ground it in some human reality, such as our capacity to be curious, to value things, or simply to make meaningful utterances. Bourbon's book could almost have been about Jones, who valued *Finnegans Wake* (at least the sections he read) above almost anything else in modern poetry<sup>69</sup>; Izenberg could have written also about Auden, for whom Yeats was a bugbear, Oppen an American doppelganger, and O'Hara a scion.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Letter to W. H. Auden, 25 February 1954, Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, 161.

<sup>70</sup> I discuss Yeats's influence on Auden in chapter 6. Oppen, like Auden, began his career as a politically engaged poet only to conclude that poetry could not achieve anything politically. O'Hara's postmodernist verse was influenced by the later Auden's casual style.

But it is the later Jones and Auden that would fit smoothly into these books: Jones's *The Anathemata*, fragmentary and macaronic to the point of unintelligibility, which so resembles the nonsense of *Finnegans Wake*; the crossword-like constructions of Auden's last decades which, like the works of Izenberg's poets, so value the sheer exercise of the linguistic faculty over any monumental poem it might produce. Of these later works, it might make sense to say that they were intentionally meaningless, meant not to communicate anything in particular so much as to highlight that human beings are capable of such ostentatious formality, and that other human beings are capable of valuing it. The works on which the present project focuses, however, especially *In Parenthesis* and "The Sea and the Mirror," do not merely endeavor to exemplify some human activity, but also try to think through the nature of that activity. We can understand these works to constitute a series of attempts at the same time to understand the purpose of artistic creation and to accomplish that purpose. If the purpose of art has more to do with the possibility of meaningfulness than with any particular meaning, still to understand this purpose requires drawing attention to this possibility and the particular circumstances that make it possible.

If this sounds somewhat abstractly recursive, I can only say that it is indeed so, and acknowledge my debt to certain philosophical accounts in which art plays a mediating role in human self-understanding. Such accounts come in both grandiloquent and deflationary varieties, as with philosophy in general (contrast Heidegger and Wittgenstein), and both have their value. As an instance of provocative grandiloquence along these lines in recent literary scholarship, I will mention a book by Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visual Language of Modernism*. McGann comes close to arguing that modernist poetry's realization of the

materiality of language constituted the world's recognition of itself as self-expressive; the poem, it turns out, does not contain a thought, it is both an act and a mask of thought. I have also found helpfully deflating Miguel Tamen's *What Art is Like: With Constant Reference to the Alice Books*, which compares art to, among other things, something we do and something that becomes part of us, and which we talk about as a way of sending presents to distant parts of ourselves. Taken together, McGann and Tamen suggest that poetry and personhood are intimately intertwined, that the reading and writing of poetry somehow gets at the heart of what it means to be a person, despite the fact that any given poem is at best peripheral, and that many people live perfectly happy lives reading no poetry at all.

Each of these books, it is worth mentioning, violates the norms of scholarly discourse, McGann's lapsing into a platonic dialogue between fictional modern-day academics, Tamen's consisting of "remarks [which] will often accumulate as arguments" and citing as evidence only the works of Lewis Carroll.<sup>71</sup> Reading them, one begins to suspect that it is impossible to talk about what art does without recognizing that one's very talk is itself a kind of art. Such is, I would submit, the sense one gets also from reading Jones and Auden's work, particularly the two books at the heart of the present study, Jones's *In Parenthesis* and Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror." If I have been less formally adventurous than any of these four, it is due more to convention than conviction.

### 3. Chapter Summary

This book contains six chapters, counting the present introductory chapter as the first.

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<sup>71</sup> Tamen, *What Art Is Like, In Constant Reference to the Alice Books*, 3.



In the preceding pages I have sought primarily to establish the critical context and motivation for this project, but have also framed the principal question Jones and Auden faced as one of poetic vocation: what does the poet do for his audience, and who or what authorizes him to do it? The following chapters develop this seed into a single continuous argument about the opening decades of Jones's and Auden's careers. Rather than moving in strict chronological order, I starts with these authors' simplest works and move gradually to more complex productions.

My argument begins in Chapter Two with an account of Jones's and Auden's shifting understanding of poetic vision. Both began in frustration, seeing the poem as a landscape to whose suffering the poet could not adequately witness. Each would later reject the poetics on which this picture depended, wherein the poet acts as founding witness on behalf of an imagined community, impressing its experience upon the reader. They came to believe instead that poetry should communicate simultaneously both desire to exist together in a community of desiring subjects, and knowledge of the suffering such communities inevitably ignore and sometimes inflict. The poet in this landscape occupies a position of purposeful self-exposure, his poetry exhibiting him as an exemplary member of the real, imperfect community of human suffering.

Such exhibition can run against the modernist current, particularly modernism's efforts to invent an anti-theatrical drama of sacred ritual. Chapter Three considers Jones's and Auden's attempts in the face of these efforts to salvage a secular theater. It focuses on the major works which immediately preceded *In Parenthesis* and "The Sea and the Mirror," namely, the illustrations Jones engraved for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Auden's "For the Time

Being: A Christmas Oratorio.” These works make remarkable, and remarkably similar, formal choices, involving several pairs of conceptually complementary scenes. These oppositions, I argue, are meant to suggest that the secular theater’s lack of an absolute ground does not make it irrational, but, on the contrary, allows it to establish a contingent but nevertheless valuable community, one whose validity cannot be imposed but which the audience can freely recognize.

In sum, Chapters Two and Three look successively at two ways in which these poets in their early work reconfigured high modernism’s relationship with its audience: first, through the autonomous lyric, which sought to establish an aesthetic realm free from outside interference; second, through ritual theater, which sought to reconstitute a community within the artwork and subordinate to the artist’s directions. The next two chapters focus on a deep formal kinship between these two poets’ mid-career masterpieces, Jones’s 1937 book *In Parenthesis*, a prose-poem epic about life in the trenches of the Great War, and Auden’s “The Sea and the Mirror: a Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” (first published in 1944 alongside “For the Time Being” in a volume itself titled, confusingly, *For the Time Being*). In Chapter Four, I argue that these works seek to demonstrate the possibility of a non-fratricidal poetics; in Chapter Five, I show how this possibility depends on having poetry mediate between individual experience and communal understanding.

Chapter Four traces how fratricide becomes a central image for both works: *In Parenthesis* follows a battalion moving towards the disaster of the Somme, preparing to fight against enemies who, the narrator continually reminds us, are the brothers of the soldiers themselves. “The Sea and the Mirror,” meanwhile, lingers with the characters of *The Tempest*

on their voyage back to Naples, and focuses on the residual conflict between the brothers Prospero and Antonio. Both works are deeply concerned with the nature of poetry, and its connection to human life. Bringing these together, I suggest that Jones and Auden are both concerned with what I term poetic fratricide, meaning the conflict between *homo politicus* and *homo faber*, and the way in which poetry threatens to erase human plurality in favor of aesthetic order. I suggest that these works consider such fratricide to be an inherent danger to the artistic endeavor, and one which can be overcome only by making visible what poetry threatens to erase, the inherent nobility of human beings.

Chapter Five then turns from this vision of fratricide defeated to these works' attempts to analyze that defeat. Each book associates the vision of hidden princes with a female character symbolic of communal harmony. I argue that both *In Parenthesis* and "The Sea and the Mirror" seek to interpret this figure, not as a Madonna-like emblem of religious salvation, but as the ideal of peace lying at the end point of the recursive process of poetic interpretation. Jones and Auden both offer this recursive process as an explicit theory, and attempt to display it for us through their works' complex and self-referential structures. The baroque prose of Jones's Preface and Endnotes, and Auden's address to the audience via the character of Caliban, are meant to guide us toward a proper understanding of how poems relate to one another, to their authors, and to their audience.

The final chapter extends this project's horizon from Jones and Auden to their contemporaries: having sketched what I take to be Jones's and Auden's theory of poetic community, I show how it offered them, and can offer us, a new perspective on the difficulties of modernist poetry. I begin by offering a polemical reading of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et

Decorum Est” alongside W. B. Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli,” contrasting them with Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” and concluding that each of the two modernist poems radically undermines its own poetic validity through its attempts to wage war against the audience of the other. I follow this argument with a consideration of one modernist poet’s attempt to escape this war, showing how T. S. Eliot’s poetic drama *Murder in the Cathedral* tries to replace poetic conquest with poetic martyrdom. I close by showing how these arguments are rooted in Jones and Auden’s own critical insights about the difference between a poetics of violence and a poetics of life.

## CHAPTER 2: AGAINST THE POET AS DIVINE TRANSPARENT EYEBALL

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.<sup>1</sup>

These words of Ralph Waldo Emerson limn a particular understanding of aesthetic perception, and in so doing suggest its dangers. Consider the central image of the “transparent eyeball.” On the one hand, it recalls the ancient definition of God as “an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere,” thus preparing us for the sentence’s concluding divinization. On the other, it calls to mind a grotesque fantasy of a hovering eyeball yanked from its socket, blood-filled veins pulsing, optic nerve dangling down in the back, the possibility of such violence having been already suggested by the earlier parenthetical “(leaving me my eyes).” I would suggest that this barely-concealed threat is not what Emerson escapes, but rather what he enacts, in moving from plural to singular. Leaving the first sentence’s “we” behind for the second’s “I,” Emerson almost immediately finds himself left, not (as he hoped) with his “eyes,” but with his single “eye,” irretrievably separated from the corporate body, unable even to remember a time when it was its brother’s keeper. What could it mean for us as a community to return to reason and faith, if reason and faith—apparently interchangeable—can be found only in the infinite solitary ego? I know, I think, how to find myself in Emerson’s explicitly vanishing “I,” but how can we find ourselves in Emerson’s

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson, “Nature,” 10.

implicitly vanishing “we”?

Keats pejoratively named the aesthetic mode here exemplified the egotistical sublime; T. E. Hulme described it as spilt religion; Harold Bloom, more approbatively, called it American gnosticism. My goal is less to evaluate these things than to determine where David Jones and W. H. Auden stood in relation to them. It will surprise no one that two British modernist Christians opposed what Emerson stood for. To say, further, that they did so in order to combat a tendency they found within themselves, is only to echo the by now commonplace claim that modernist anti-romanticism is still a form of romanticism.<sup>2</sup> My focus, then, will be on locating the specific territory of contestation on which Jones and Auden sought to work out their relationship to post-romantic poetry from Emerson to Eliot. I take this territory to be, not simply the isolated subject’s aesthetic perception, but the way in which its poetic expression implicates that subject in a linguistic community of human persons, with all their corporeal vulnerability, while at the same time threatening or promising the possibility of inhuman impersonality.<sup>3</sup> I mean, more specifically, to focus our attention on the occasion for Emerson’s transcendental flight: he finds himself “in the woods,” contemplating a landscape. That Jones and Auden, despite not engaging with Emerson himself, inherit the latter’s situation, is most

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<sup>2</sup> Three older but still worthwhile books on the question are Stead, *The New Poetic*, Bornstein, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens*, and Perl, *The Tradition of Return*.

<sup>3</sup> For an intriguing, not entirely satisfying book about corporeal perception and modernist impersonality, see Walter, *Optical Impersonality*. Walter’s titular phrase refers to a “combination of embodied subjectivity and its social consequences” (6). Two helpful works on impersonality and embodiment more generally are Cameron, *Impersonality* and Part VI, “Alienated Majesty,” of Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*.

immediately visible in their own engagement with landscape. That engagement will be the subject of the present chapter.<sup>4</sup>

Before moving on from Emerson, we should notice this word “woods.” Though Emerson may intend by it something like “primeval forest,” the effect of his rhetoric depends on it meaning something much more comfortable, not a threatening wilderness inhabited by wild animals and wild men but a pleasant glade a convenient distance from home. Such is, indeed, what the word typically means: a wood is a cluster of trees neither too large nor too dense to prohibit human engagement, and almost always the result of some amount of human cultivation (as the woods Emerson knew were, whether he knew it or not). Even Emerson’s diction, then, admits what he would elide, that the uninhabited landscape to which the romantic responds is never untouched, only abandoned. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” is perhaps more honest, explicitly acknowledging the inhabitation it soon transcends. We can begin to understand Jones’s and Auden’s landscapes when we see that, from the beginnings of their careers, these poets found themselves unable to do either. Although the romantic landscape as locus of aesthetic perception enthralled them, they were unable to elide or transcend their knowledge that what they sought even in such scenes were traces of human persons. As Auden put it in his 1936 poem “Letter to Lord Byron”: “To me Art’s subject is the human clay, | And landscape but a background to a torso.”<sup>5</sup> The romantic outlook denied them such traces, and for this reason they found it self-stultifying, containing not Emerson’s uplifting “reason and faith” but

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<sup>4</sup> My argument does not depend on Jones and Auden’s specific response to Emerson. Though they may not have considered Emerson a forbear, nevertheless they inherited him through Eliot.

<sup>5</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 100.

rather a land which, cut off, would not communicate. Before either could locate a communicative landscape, he would have to transform utterly his approach to aesthetic perception.

This chapter traces this gradual transformation over the opening decades of Jones and Auden's careers, as revealed in the shifting relations they establish between landscape, observer, and inhabitants. I proceed in three stages, each pairing one of Auden's lyric poems with one of Jones's sketches or prints. The first diptych comes from the beginning of Jones and Auden embarking on their respective aesthetic projects, and evinces these authors' initial frustration with the modes of aesthetic perception they inherited. The second comprises works from about a decade in, in which we see these authors search for a new kind of poetic making, requiring adjustments in the relations between poem and world, poem and reader, poem and author. The third, pairing works from about a decade later, shows the fruits of these adjustments, which lead the author to present himself, not as an outside observer of an inhabited landscape imaginatively perceived, but rather as an exemplary member of the real landscape of suffering that is human being. Put more succinctly, Jones and Auden reintegrate self and landscape not, as Emerson does, through the disincorporated eye-ball, but through the wounded body.

### 1. Suffering Estrangement

When I described Jones's and Auden's early experience of landscape as one which, cut off, would not communicate, I was borrowing a phrase from the first of Auden's collected



poems, “The Watershed,” written in August 1927.<sup>6</sup> I selected this phrase both because it succinctly encapsulates that poem’s aesthetic situation, and because, so I will argue, it applies equally well to one of the earliest of Jones’s intentionally preserved adult works, the 1921 sketch of soldiers playing dice at the foot of the cross. Setting these two side by side will help us get into focus the communicative frustrations Jones and Auden shared at the outset.

I should emphasize that, in calling these works the “first collected” and “earliest preserved,” I do not mean that they are earliest composed. As I discussed in the introduction, both Jones and Auden discovered their artistic “vocation” quite early on, Jones at age six, that is, around 1902, and Auden at age fifteen, in 1922. By 1919 and 1927, respectively, both had been seriously pursuing an artistic career for many years. Jones enrolled at Camberwell Art School in 1909, where he first encountered Impressionism, and after serving as a private in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers from 1915 to 1919 he enrolled again, this time at Westminster Art School, from the campus of which he could and often did walk to Westminster Cathedral to see the Stations of the Cross carved by Eric Gill. It was while at Westminster that the drawing of soldiers dicing was made, as a preparatory sketch for a never-completed monumental oil painting. Auden’s poetic education was less formal than Jones’s painterly one but no less thorough. Auden began composing large amounts of verse while still at boarding school, imitating Wordsworth and Hardy, and continued doing so when he went up to Oxford in 1925, where he encountered the poetry of Eliot. His juvenilia of 1922–1929 span almost 250 pages, with “The Watershed” on page 218.<sup>7</sup> Both the sketch I will call *Soldiers Dicing* and “The Watershed” stand at the end, not the beginning, of a long period of artistic development.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 32.

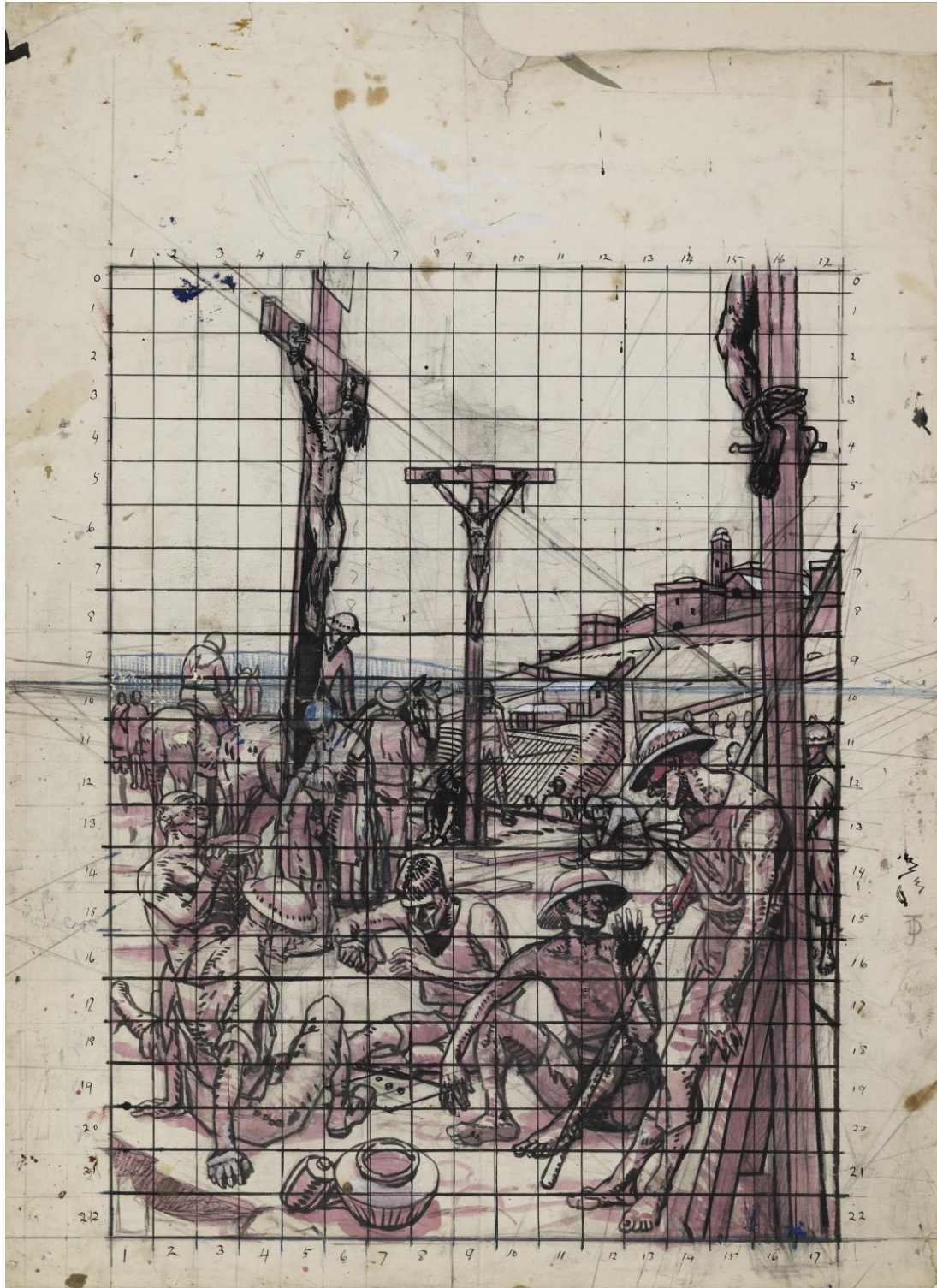
My claim in pairing these two works is not, therefore, that as soon as Jones and Auden began to pursue their poetic vocations they ran up against an aesthetic impasse. Rather, I am suggesting that the apprehension of such an impasse was an achievement, indeed the first of their aesthetic achievements, and one which would set the program for the next several decades of their careers. *Soldiers Dicing* and “The Watershed” are among the first of their authors’ non-juvenile works, that is, of the works in which their authors recognized themselves, to which in later years they would be willing to affix their signatures. Though it is not necessary for my argument, it is pleasingly emblematic that each is, in some sense, the very first of these. *Soldiers Dicing* is one of the few works, and the largest of these, to survive from Jones’s art-school days, and the only one he kept in his possession for his entire life.<sup>8</sup> And “The Watershed” is the earliest written of those poems Auden allowed into his *Collected Poems*, a signal that, as he understood his own development, this poem announced his poetic coming-of-age. In initiating our comparison of Jones’s and Auden’s oeuvres with these two works, we are beginning where Jones and Auden have suggested that we ought to begin.

Why—it will be helpful to ask at the outset—did Jones hold on to the sketch of soldiers dicing? The sketch has occasionally been noticed for its foreshadowing many of Jones’s later concerns, for example, through the analogy it draws between British Tommies and Roman Legionaries, and certainly the anachronistic uniforms are one of the more interesting, and more

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Auden, *Juvenilia*. Some critics, I note, take the existence of this juvenilia to call into question the usual narrative of Auden’s career; David Rosen goes so far as to seek to rehabilitate the suppressed work at the expense of the endorsed (cf. Rosen, *Plain English*, 140–172). I would not go so far as this; if Auden’s suppression of these poems was so total as to be a kind of self-deception, still many of them were essentially derivative and worth suppressing.

<sup>8</sup> Hills, “The Pierced Hermaphrodite,” 426.



*Illustration 2: David Jones, Study of soldiers playing dice at the foot of the Cross, c. 1921, ink on paper, 77 by 46 cm. Tate Archive. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported).*

avant-garde, elements of the work. But this does not quite answer our question, since to preserve that thought would have required only a small sketch of a few figures, not what we have here, a fully thought-out and substantially sized preparatory cartoon. My suggestion is that Jones valued not only its content, but also its formal experimentation. Biographical context gives good reason to expect such experimentation: by 1921 Jones had been thinking about post-impressionism for over a decade; had more recently encountered the work of avant-garde artists like Picasso, David Bomberg, and Eric Gill; and had begun to weave together Clive Bell and Roger Fry's theory of "significant form" with the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>9</sup> When we look at *Soldiers Dicing* itself, however, these influences can be difficult to detect. The figures are rendered in naturalistic detail, the landscape conforms to the standards of perspectival realism; apart from the anachronistic uniforms it might seem like a work of nineteenth century academicism. It will take some effort, then, to get into view the way in which the sketch furthered Jones's thinking about aesthetic form.

We can begin by noticing that the sketch is most arresting in the eccentric point of view it takes on the traditional subject of the Crucifixion, and the fraught relationship between figure and landscape which this new point of view effects. In a typical painting of the Crucifixion, the cross of Christ stands at the center of the image, facing the viewer head-on, flanked by the crosses of the two thieves. The right angles of the cross establish a vertical plane which divides the space into a background, usually an evocative landscape, and a foreground populated by various traditional figures: the Blessed Virgin, John the Evangelist, other female followers of Jesus, the crucifying soldiers. *Soldiers Dicing* at first seems to offer just such a division, but the

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<sup>9</sup> Bankes and Hills, *The Art of David Jones*, 18.

viewer quickly realizes that the central cross which faces him head-on is not that of Christ, but that of the thief on Christ's left, traditionally identified as the bad thief Gestas, whom Jones always associated with imperial hegemony.<sup>10</sup> Christ's cross—which we can identify both from its position relative to the two others, and from the inscription pinned to its elongated vertical beam—stands instead to the side, on the viewer's left, and is seen almost in profile. Rather than establishing a neat division between human foreground and sympathetic landscape, the crossbeam points out toward the horizon, and specifically, as the guide lines emphasize, through Gestas's cross to the gate of the city of Jerusalem, and finally to where the good thief Dysmas's cross intersects the leaning soldier's spear. That spear, after Christ's crossbeam the strongest angle in the sketch, itself runs parallel to the furrows in the distant fields, and with them points again toward the holy city. The effect is to incorporate all three of the crosses into the landscape, which no longer symbolically represents their suffering, but rather is contiguous with it.

This rearrangement transforms our perception of the figures arranged around the feet of the crosses. The figures grouped around Christ may well include the traditional characters, but we cannot clearly identify them, and there is no strong division between this group and the scattered figures receding into the distance and down the hill. The central division, instead, becomes that between the soldiers grouped at the very bottom of the picture, and everything else—crosses, mourners, inhabited landscape, distant city. Even while Christ's crossbeam

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jones's 1948 painting *Vexilla Regis*, in which three trees stand for the three crosses, and Gestas's tree turns at its top into a Roman column. This view of Gestas was shaped by a line from Augustine's *Civitas Dei*: "Justice removed, then, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers?" (Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* IV.4) Compare Jones: "T's a great robbery | —is empire" (Jones, *The Anathemata*, 88).

directs our gaze outward, these seated soldiers trap us in the foreground, barring us from making our way even so far as Christ's cross itself. The world of the soldiers and that of the crucified interact in only two places: the upraised bowl and face of the kneeling soldier, and the point of the leaning soldier's spear. But the kneeling soldier at best parodies the attention a disciple would pay to the crucified Christ; as Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel note, he kneels not towards, but away from Christ, and is likely "praying to a thief for good luck in his game of dice."<sup>11</sup> The leaning soldier, meanwhile, bends away from the spear, and with the bowl of his helmet he deflects any gaze which might be directed at him from Christ's cross. He looks not where the spear points, but in the opposite direction, down at his seated companions. One of these looks back at him, while two others are absorbed in their game of dice, and our gaze follows theirs. This displacement of focus from suffering figure to implicated bystander is the subject of the sketch.

We must be careful not to mischaracterize the hold on our gaze which these soldiers exert. They are not seen from a distance, inviting us to contemplate their indifference; rather, we take our place among them, so close that we cannot even see the torso of the good thief, only the naked leg and pierced ankle. Nor is "indifference" quite the right word to describe their behavior, or if it is, their indifference is active, cultivated, a refusal of acknowledgment. They are playing dice—in the narrative, to decide who gets Christ's seamless garment, but in the sketch for no apparent reason at all, the garment nowhere to be seen, and the soldiers, in the dress of the modern British army, unlikely to have much use for first-century vesture. Their game reflects less their attitude towards Christ than their attitude towards the world, which they

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<sup>11</sup> Miles and Shiel, *David Jones*, 31.

see as a game of random numbers to be skillfully manipulated. We might notice also, at this point, the orthogonality of Crucifixion itself, which makes visible its torture of the human form by pinning its victim at the intersection of horizontal and vertical lines. In this sketch the crosses combine with the furrows and walls of the city to cast our vision in the same functional mathematical terms as the dicing soldiers use. The grid of guidelines with numbers running around the sides even turn the sketch into something like a military field report.

The guidelines would not, of course, have made it into the finished painting, but it seems significant that the sketch, not the painting, is what Jones left us with. Jones came to abhor both mathematical perspective itself, and the process of first producing a squared-up sketch and then mechanically transferring its contents to a larger canvas; he found these procedures to be soul-killing in much the same way as military regimentation and utilitarian technocracy. This sketch, then, works in part because it makes us see the soldiers by seeing *like* the soldiers.<sup>12</sup> The effect is, for a Crucifixion scene drawn by a pious Christian, quite peculiar. We are tempted to adore the central crucified figure, only later to realize that this figure is not Christ but Gestas. Our attention then shifts, not so much to the executed Christ, as down the page to the callous executioners. Because they are dressed like British Tommies, we are once again tempted, this time to so much pity the soldiers that we ignore their status as imperial executioners. In doing so, we come to share these executioners' indifference to their victims. We cannot even see Dysmas's face, only his feet and legs, as if the soldiers have, in raising up

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<sup>12</sup> I take issue here, if only slightly, with Paul Hill's suggestion that in this image "Jones' borrowed illustrator's style is too prosaic to accommodate ambiguity" (Hills, "The Pierced Hermaphrodite," 426). I take the sketch's prosaic style to be precisely what the image brings into question.

his crucified body to public display, rendered him invisible to their world of concern. Once we realize that all of this is going on, we begin to worry—but it is not the suffering so much as our indifference to it that bothers us.<sup>13</sup>

What, then, of the sketch's formal experimentation? We have seen that it wrestles with real problems of perception, visibility, imaginative projection, and theatricality, this last word in the sense given it by Michael Fried, concerning how our suspicion that something has been intentionally put on display can lead us to doubt its independent reality.<sup>14</sup> These were not the explicit theoretical concerns of Jones's contemporaries, to whom talk of theatricality would have sounded like a subjective distraction from the objectivity of abstract form. Theatricality does, however, as Fried has argued convincingly, implicitly and unconsciously underlie those concerns, at least in the case of Roger Fry, a crucial influence on Jones.<sup>15</sup> In essence, the turn toward abstraction and "significant form" was a turn against representational art on the grounds that it was unavoidably dishonest, theatrical, a manipulation of our emotional responses to the human form dramatically displayed. The soldiers looking away from the thief on the cross toward their game of dice are not so different from the cubists, vorticists, and other devotees of abstract form looking away from the human toward the geometric.

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding the soldiers and utility, Miles and Shiel write: "The soldiers are 'instruments' certainly, but in their resemblance to First World War Tommies, they are also victims" (Miles and Shiel, *David Jones*, 32). But I do not think this is correct. To be bothered by our own, and the soldiers', indifference, does not make us, or the soldiers, into a victim; neither does the equation of Roman legionnaires to British tommies.

<sup>14</sup> See especially Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*. Though Fried has written little about early twentieth century art, my understanding of Jones's work has been crucially informed by his writing about nineteenth century French painting.

<sup>15</sup> As Fried puts it, Fry's "entire book is written under the twin signs of absorption and antitheatricality, but without the writer being aware that this is so" (Fried, "Roger Fry's Formalism," 32).



Though this latter category almost included Jones, his art never became truly abstract; the significance of its “significant forms” would always involve myriad levels of meaning, not a single unspeakable intuition rooted in line and color and devoid of history or narrative. (Indeed, Jones’s only affiliation with institutional modernism, which came in 1928 when he joined the Seven and Five Society, ended eight years later when the society expelled him out for refusing to follow Ben Nicholson’s lead into dogmatic abstraction.<sup>16</sup>) It is not too big a stretch to say that *Soldiers Dicing*, with its refusal of the usual religious meaning of the Crucifixion scene, is among the most abstract of all of his works. This claim does not contradict our earlier observation that the sketch is far more naturalistic than his later paintings would ever be. The sketch, I suggest, attacks both naturalism and abstraction, and on the same grounds, that they are unable to make an artistic response to human suffering: the sketch allegorizes the natural or abstract artist as the dicing soldier. This attack, however, is carried out by means of both naturalist and abstract techniques; the sketch consists both of a realistically laid out landscape, and a grid of orthogonal lines overlaid on top of it. Ultimately, the sketch becomes the target of its own critique.

A similarly circular critique, as well as a similarly troubled displacement of affect, occurs in Auden’s “The Watershed.” This poem, written in the years when Eliot’s influence on Auden was at its height, offers a bleak description of a desolate industrial landscape which ends up focusing instead on the desolation of the observer at his exclusion from it. Despite its

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<sup>16</sup> Dilworth, *David Jones*, 185. Other prominent Society members included Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. It should be noted that, though Jones and the Society were certainly in disagreement about abstraction, his expulsion can also be attributed to his failure to show any work with them for two years running, following his nervous breakdown in 1934.

apparent concern for the plight of the worker, this poem has no readily extracted political message; as David Rosen puts it, “an air of meaningfulness does not yield much clear meaning.”<sup>17</sup> Rather, the absence of meaning becomes the meaning itself. We can see this story in the opening of the two verse paragraphs. The first enmeshes us in its labyrinthine syntax:

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,  
On the wet road between the chafing grass  
Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,  
Snatches of tramline running to a wood,  
An industry already comatose,  
Yet sparsely living. [...]

Having encountered what appears to be an interrogative—“who is standing here?”—only on the third line do we recognize that it is in fact a free relative clause—“whoever stands at the crux (whatever that is) sees below him (whatever it is the poem shows us).” We wonder who it is who looks out over a dying industrial landscape, only to discover almost by accident that it is we who do so, so long as we persevere in inhabiting the “crux” of the poem.

We survey this landscape, at least, for the duration of the first verse paragraph. The second paragraph, however, opens by questioning our right to do so, offering a different answer to the question which the first lines of the poem had almost asked. It is as if the first half of the poem leads our gaze over the landscape in the manner of a travel guide, only for the second half of the poem to condemn us for accepting the invitation:

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,  
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:  
This land, cut off, will not communicate

The repetition here—two accusations of “stranger,” two charges to “Go home, now” and to “turn back again”—merely extends the assault of the poem’s already agitated, telegraphic

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<sup>17</sup> Rosen, *Plain English*, 140.

grammar. The “stock” of the first line find its attempts at perception thwarted, and it is this thwarting, rather than any suffering on the part of the landscape’s inhabitants, which the reader feels most strongly. This frustration of vision establishes a metapoetic analogy, one which dominates the entire second paragraph: the poem, like the land, will not communicate, will “wake no sleeper,” will “seldom” make any noise at all. It offers no clear message—no “sap un baffled rises”—but only a faint air of impending doom, as sensed by the disembodied rabbit in the final lines, where “Near you, taller than the grass, | Ears poise before decision, scenting danger.” If this rabbit offers a figure for our relationship with the landscape the poem barely allows us to inhabit, it shows our access being gradually closed off, from the panorama of sight to the event-consciousness of sound to the gradual, easily missed subtlety of smell.

The spur for this anxious fragmenting of the reader’s body is the earlier, more callous fragmenting of the landscape’s unknown inhabitants. The first verse paragraph transitions smoothly from a survey of the mines’ mechanics to a series of macabre anecdotes:

And, further, here and there, though many dead  
Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen,  
Taken from recent winters; two there were  
Cleaned out a damaged shaft by hand, clutching  
The winch a gale would tear them from; one died  
During a storm, the fells impassable,  
Not at his village, but in wooden shape  
Through long abandoned levels nosed his way  
And in his final valley went to ground.

These lines are remarkable for what they do not include: any acknowledgement of the humanity of those whose demise they commemorate. We are told that “two there were,” but we feel these two to be less persons than “some acts” which have been “chosen” (by whom?)—and the “acts” are not the acts of these two persons, but the acts of God or nature which bring about their

demise. The “gale” is the agent here while the miners are mere patients, never named other than by number—“two,” “one”—and by estranged body—the “hand, clutching | The winch,” the corpse which “in wooden shape | Through long abandoned levels nosed his way.” These deaths are not foreground to the landscape’s background, but rather part of the landscape, buried underground and even before their burial surveyed from such a great distance that they cannot be individually distinguished.

If the link between first and second verse paragraphs is that between a trespass and its rebuke, then the trespass consists in this depersonalizing dissolution of inhabitant into landscape, while the second paragraph punishes the solvent, the “stranger,” “you,” with exile. This punishment does not leave the speaker in possession of the territory so much as it leaves the territory absent of writer and reader both. With these exiles the poem implements almost too literally the modernist theory of poetic impersonality which Auden would have absorbed from his reading of Eliot. Eliot’s theory had been an attempt to escape the self-involvement of the romantic ego: against Wordsworth’s theory of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility,” which Eliot found an “inexact formula,” Eliot had asserted: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion.”<sup>18</sup> Eliot’s argument, incidentally, closely resembles those of modernist art critics regarding aesthetic form, its separation from ordinary life, and the difficulty of entering into this separation; Eliot even uses the phrase “*significant* emotion,” defined in opposition to “sincere emotion” as “emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet.”<sup>19</sup> In exiling the stranger “you,” and refraining from any first-

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<sup>18</sup> Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

person pronoun, “The Watershed” repudiates Auden’s earlier attraction to romanticism, and specifically, as both Richard Bozorth and David Rosen have independently observed, to a Wordsworthian lyrical encounter with the landscape.<sup>20</sup>

Yet if Auden’s poem rejects the egotistical sublime, neither does it enter into the classical equilibrium enjoined by the ideal of poetic impersonality. As Mendelson points out, Auden’s “literary anonymity was a thoroughly romantic antiromanticism, as obsessed with the self it excluded as an earlier romanticism was with the self it expressed.”<sup>21</sup> By itself, this would not much differentiate Auden’s impersonality from Eliot’s, which was far more romantically anti-romantic than early commentators cared to admit. We can, however, point to two significant differences: first, “The Watershed” does not even hold out the hope of overcoming such self-obsession; second, it does not seem convinced that an impersonal attitude would be a positive development to begin with. The first verse paragraph offers an infernal landscape riddled with corpses; when the second paragraph introduces “you,” albeit for the sake of banishing the stranger, it comes as a relief. Further, the reason the stranger must be banished is not that art must be impersonal, but that, given the landscape’s condition, the stranger cannot rise to the level of personhood: the land will

Be no accessory content to one  
Aimless for faces rather there than here.

The watershed refuses to provide meaningful content to anyone who views it with their mind only on aesthetic form. To search for “faces rather there than here” is to keep the human visage at a distance, to refuse to make towards it any human response. “The Watershed” finds the

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<sup>20</sup> See Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 47, and Rosen, *Plain English*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 53.

impulse toward tourism, which Auden felt as much as anyone, to be self-defeating, and criticizes both the desire for impersonal aesthetic form, and any attempt to redeem the desire by transforming it into a political or economic interest. It offers no hint of a viable alternative to these transgressions.

In sum, just as *Soldiers Dicing* engaged with by turning away from Fryean abstract form, so “The Watershed” engaged with by turning away from Eliotic impersonal emotion. Though we should not push the analogy too far, it extends naturally to cover even the poem’s prosody. As the sketch used academic naturalism to think about abstraction, so “The Watershed” used traditional meter to think about modernist experimentation: though Auden’s lines possess the clipped, elliptical grammar of the most extreme free verse, the poem is written in pure blank verse. It’s worth noting that neither of the resulting styles served as a model for its author’s future work; within a few years both had moved on to quite a different aesthetic mode. This does not, to be sure, mean that the one is a failed poem or the other a failed picture. Both succeed, only it is success of a peculiar kind. Neither does much more than demonstrate, with great formal ingenuity, its own aesthetic paralysis, a result of its failure either to face head-on the landscape whose suffering it could not adequately witness, or to rest easy in a retreat to abstraction or impersonality. If neither gets into full view the suffering landscape—neither locates the proper distance at which poetry can take place—nevertheless each gets into full view its own inability to do so.

## 2. Masterful Works

I now jump forward around a decade in each case to a second pair of works: for Jones,

the 1930 woodcut *The Bride*, and for Auden, the 1938 poem “Musée des Beaux Arts.” I will not attempt here to recount in full the history of the intervening years in these figures’ development, but I would emphasize that for both it was a time of both personal and intellectual unrest. Though the specific commitments of Jones and Auden in these years differ, they shared a desire for a means to convince the silent landscape to reveal its secrets and allow for the formation, not of an alienated aesthetic form, but of a true community. Further, both conceived this means in terms of intellectual mastery: if they could identify the proper way in which a community should be organized, then they could embed that organization into their art, whereby the art as well would become communicative. The hope, ultimately, was to find a philosophy of art and an artistic community to which and in which one could become disciple and apprentice. At this quest neither poet was entirely successful.

These poets’ hopes for a definite achievement of artistic community reached their peak around the composition of the works discussed in the introductory chapter, Jones’s *The Nativity* and Auden’s “On This Island.” Within a year of *Soldiers Dicing* Jones converted to Roman Catholicism, immersed himself in the neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain, and joined Eric Gill’s Catholic artist’s collective at Ditchling Common, an attempt to revoke the modern world’s alienation of human being from his labor. In 1924, the year of Jones’s “The Nativity” woodcut, he followed Gill to southern Wales when the latter split with the Ditchling guild. Maritain had attracted Jones for what he said about the metaphysical reality of the artist’s creations, and the importance of this recognition to a well-ordered community. This view, importantly, did not entirely harmonize with a cornerstone of Gill’s thinking, the belief that modern art suffered from an inflated opinion of its own importance and capacity for transcendence. For Gill,

painters, printers, poets, and the rest should not hope to be autonomous artists but craftsmen, serving an essentially propagandistic function. Though Jones never fully accepted this reductive view, in practice he conformed to it for a time, focusing on genres like devotional aids, book illustrations, and Christmas cards. This constraint did not last long after he left Ditchling; as a signpost of the intellectual distance he traveled, I point to his situation in 1928, living with his parents in London and trying to make his way as a professional artist.

Auden's early career was similarly vexed by the relationship between art, community, and propaganda. In 1928–29 Auden had spent nine liberating (and libertine) months in Berlin, which planted the seed of his interest in social and psychological theories, including, but not limited to, Marx and Freud. Contemplating the intertwining of social alienation with psychological repression, Auden imagined that poetry could be an aid to reversing both, and so aligned himself with the political Left despite not having any strong commitment to the specific tenets of Marxist thought. For the next five years he worked as a schoolmaster in boy's schools—an environment which was, for him, something akin to a complete community in microcosm—meanwhile developing a reputation as the leading leftist poet (a reputation that made him quite uncomfortable). In 1935, around the time of "On This Island," he began working instead as a freelance writer, claiming to believe that poetry should be a form of activist journalism. But the months he spent in Spain in 1936, at the height of the Civil War, and his subsequent abortive attempts to write propaganda poetry about "the struggle," quickly dissuaded him of that notion. By 1938, Auden could no longer find convincing the thought that poetry's purpose was to act as straightforward propaganda for any social order, present or future.



These adventures in totalizing theories would never entirely cease, but would henceforth have substantially less power over the lives of the poets who pursued them. Jones's and Auden's feeling of estrangement between artist, artwork, and audience had not vanished, but its quality had been altered. *Soldiers Dicing* and "The Watershed" are tonally characterized by a thrilling recognition of the impossibility of bridging the gap. *The Bride* and "Musée des Beaux Arts" are at the same time more restrained and more uncertain. The gap is now a fact of life, mastery of which is a precondition to any viable theory of art: if the estrangement of artwork from ordinary life were to go away, one would not have art at all, but something else, craft or propaganda. These works' confidence in this reality is not, however, matched by an equal confidence in what it says about art, or about us. Does art's estrangement bother us? Should it?

It might seem odd to attribute to "Musée des Beaux Arts" a poised ambivalence. The poem, an ekphrastic on some landscape paintings by Brueghel, famously begins with a rejection of uncertainty<sup>22</sup>:

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position: how it takes place

The third line's enjambment, however, is misleading. Taken as the end of the phrase, "how it takes place" suggests that the old Masters—meaning, here, Brueghel, but both the honorific and the plural are significant—know some specific fact about what it means for something to be suffering. They might know, for example, its cure and its cause (the knowledge of a doctor or torturer), or its typical mannerisms, the ways in which limbs of the suffering writhe and their mouths hang open (the knowledge of the sculptor of the *Laocoön*). What the old Masters know,

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<sup>22</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 179.

instead, is suffering's context:

[...] how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along

This knowledge is quite minimal. We are not even sure that it qualifies as knowledge, since to be ignorant of it is scarcely imaginable: who could really believe that no one person ever performs an action unrelated to the suffering of some other person?

Apparently, many of us can. We easily come away from this poem under the impression that it tells us of the unfathomable importance of suffering to those whose actions only appear unrelated to it. Alexander Nemerov, for example, writes that the poem “deeply acknowledges, and indelibly registers, the suffering it would appear to exclude.”<sup>23</sup> I recognize the impulse to describe the poem's tone in this way, but would suggest that in this context words such as “deeply” and “indelibly” register an attempt to compensate with profundity for what is lacking in specificity. We want the suffering in question to be deeply meaningful, to matter to everyone in the world no matter what they are doing, but this is not what the poem offers us, nor what the old Masters are said to understand. Neither, to be sure, do they teach us that the suffering is *not* meaningful, as if the poem's doctrine were a kind of stoic apatheia. The old Masters do not seem to have any positive doctrine at all. They offer us less a piece of knowledge than a reminder of our own ignorance: we cannot know in advance what importance one person's suffering will have for any other (and sometimes, as with Christ or Icarus, this importance will be immense). They know, moreover, that this common ignorance is difficult to hold consistently

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<sup>23</sup> Nemerov, “The Flight of Form,” 800.

in view. The poem's highest praise for the old Masters is that "they were never wrong," "they never forgot." These phrases ask us to imagine what it would look like to be wrong, to forget.

The phrase of Nemerov's which I singled out suggests an answer: forgetting would look like a descent into a facile profundity. In painting, it would look like Jones's *Soldiers Dicing*. This sketch resembles Brueghel's *Icarus* in its depiction of suffering and indifference to suffering, but where the Old Master showed them to inhabit the same plane, Jones draws a radical divide between background and foreground and then worries about the gap between them. In poetry, it would look like Auden's "The Watershed." The voice of this poem cannot cease to ponder the suffering of the "many dead" who "Lie under the poor soil" because it cannot accept that, even if suffering matters infinitely, is not the only thing in its world that matters; it cannot accept that, even as others suffer, life goes on. The result is the anxious poise, "scenting danger," of that poem's cramped, elliptical iambic pentameter. In contrast, "Musée des Beaux Arts," able to acknowledge "the human position," can contemplate at its leisure the problem of suffering, achieving a feeling of discursive precision through well-balanced free verse. The poem's rhymes are sufficiently haphazard to avoid any suspicion that the logic was fitted to the music rather than vice versa, while still present enough to preserve a pleasing consonance. It is easy to overlook the fact that all lines are end-rhymed except "place" (as if to suggest that place is, for this poem, a problem). Without these rhymes, however, the poem would sound very different. In their presence, the altered atmosphere of this poem allows for a clear perspective on the landscape that in "The Watershed" had revolted against the onlooker's gaze.

At this point my inclusion of this poem in an argument about the status of landscape needs some justification. I take it that the poem takes for granted that we will recognize the paintings it describes, and recognize them as landscapes, albeit landscapes of a curious kind. The first stanza alludes to two paintings of Brueghel's, while the second directly mentions a third. Here is *The Census at Bethlehem*:

[...] when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:

Here is *The Massacre of the Innocents*:

[...] even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

And here is *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*:

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

These facts do not, however, make this a poem "about" landscape in a straightforward sense.

Each of the paintings referred to takes a broad view, the first two of town squares, the third of a calm bay with a furrowed field, perched high on a steep slope, in the foreground. Auden's description of them does not offer this same view, but instead slightly shifts the emphasis to the specific figures inhabiting it. Rather than inhabiting Brueghel's unerring perspective, the poem only describes, wonderingly, from a distance, the contrast it calls up, remaining uncertain

whether a closer approach is possible.

For this reason the poem simply does not feel like a landscape poem, despite it being a meditation on a landscape painter, and spending the entire second stanza on a detailed description of one landscape painting in particular. “Musée des Beaux Arts” does not find itself estranged from the landscape only because it makes no effort to inhabit it, instead contemplating its myriad inhabitants and the various virtues and vices of their attitudes towards the human world in which they live. This is what I mean by calling “Musée des Beaux Arts” ambivalent, despite its air of balanced sagacity: that atmosphere, however powerful, does not radiate from the poet, the way the anxiety of “The Watershed” did. Walter J. Slatoff suggests that “though the poem is not heartless, Auden is at pains to keep his own heart under wraps.”<sup>24</sup> Though phrased somewhat sentimentally, Slatoff’s point is basically correct—I question only whether Auden is keeping a secret, or whether he himself does not know the answer. I would put it this way: unable to see its own distressed landscape clearly, the poem offers Brueghel’s lucid one in substitute.

Auden’s choice of ekphrastic subjects seems to have been guided in part by theological concerns (the first two deal with Christ’s birth, while the last can be viewed as a symbol for his death). It also, however—and I suspect that this is the deeper reason of the two—allows for a list of passers-by arranged in dialectical progression. We move from the first painting to the second with the mention of “children,” uninterested onlookers to the “miraculous birth” in *The Census at Bethlehem* but soon enough victims of their own “dreadful martyrdom” in *The Massacre of the Innocents*. The second painting provides the “dogs go[ing] on with their doggy

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<sup>24</sup> Slatoff, *The Look of Distance*, 16.

life,” that is, the animal entirely separate from the human, and moves to the “torturer’s horse,” the animal at the service of corrupt humanity. The horse offers a transition into *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*, where it becomes the servant of the “leisurely” “ploughman” turning into the furrow. Look past the ploughman into the harbor we see the “expensive delicate ship” which represents, like the ships in “On This Island” away on “urgent voluntary errands,” the whole of civil society.

Now, Edward Mendelson interprets the development from “On This Island” to “Musée des Beaux Arts” to be one of increasing moralism: “What is implicit in [‘Musée des Beaux Arts’], and will soon become manifest in Auden’s writings, is his recognition that a ‘voluntary errand’ does not merely ignore suffering but causes it. All acts of will, all errands that have ‘somewhere to get to,’ exert force over a person or object outside the self. There is always someone who gets in the way, deliberately or by chance, someone who must be dealt with, because hunger allows no choice.”<sup>25</sup> This last phrase alludes to Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939,” suggesting that it and “Musée des Beaux Arts” are of one mind about will and error. But the later Auden suppressed, first the last line of the stanza (“We must love one another or die”), then the entire stanza, then the entire poem, on the grounds that this doctrine of will’s necessary error was itself in error. “Musée des Beaux Arts,” meanwhile, Auden left mostly untouched. If the explicit doctrine of “September 1, 1939” truly is implicit in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” then Auden must have thought the difference between explicit and implicit to be quite significant. Alternatively, and I think more plausibly, “Musée des Beaux Arts” may contain no such doctrine, but only leave itself open both to this and also to other

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<sup>25</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 323.

interpretations. Indeed, I take this open-endedness to be the point. Instead of the violent interpellation of the reader as “stranger” we get in “The Watershed”—one which forces us to beat a painful retreat—we are left calmly wondering how exactly we fit into the poem’s world. Am I an innocent child? An innocent animal? An implicated animal? A busy peasant? One of the countless citizens on the fragile ship of state? In the end, we are all and none of these, since we are not in the world of painting or poem but in the real world encountering these works of art.

This multiplicity of possible perspectives through which the reader can enter the landscape does much to determine the tone of Auden’s poem. It may at first seem strange, then, to suggest that we can locate a similar tone in Jones’s woodcut *The Bride*, which offers us neither multiplicity nor landscape. Indeed, the whole aesthetic situation seems entirely different. Rather than surveying several densely populated panoramas, we are confined indoors with a single figure filling the frame from top to bottom: an apparent bride-to-be, decked out with veil and floral crown, and carrying a lavish bouquet, kneels in a small chapel, with two small windows behind her, and lights a candle beneath the legs of a large crucifix. The resulting atmosphere of devout religiosity seems worlds away from the poem’s worldly-wise and wryly sympathetic tour guide.

Nevertheless, while I do not want collapse one into the other, I find that the account of Jones’s woodcut just given occludes several remarkable points of resemblance between it and Auden’s poem. First, and most obviously, both the poem and the woodcut continue a motif we noticed in *Soldiers Dicing* and in “The Watershed,” the fragmentation of the suffering body. The two works now under consideration settle on almost identical expressions of the motif,



*Illustration 3: David Jones, The Bride, 1930, wood engraving, 14 by 11 cm. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, reproduced with permission.*



both depicting a pair of naked legs, head and torso nowhere to be seen. Second, in both *The Bride* and “Musée des Beaux Arts” these naked legs go unperceived by other prominent figures in the scene, figures whose inattention is at the same time entirely natural and deeply disturbing. The ploughman does not hear Icarus’s cry, and the ship does not stop; the Bride looks away from the crucifix to the candles underneath. Finally, in both works the figure who fails to perceive takes the form of a well-attested metaphor for a political community: Auden’s ship is the Platonic ship of state; Jones’s bride is the Bride of Christ, the Church.

The second and third of these similarities require some elaboration. I begin with the bride’s status as Bride of Christ. The woodcut prompts this iconographic equation in various ways: how the curves of the woman find an echo in the curves of the church windows behind her; how her dress resembles in texture the walls of the church; how the flowers in her hair and in her hand make her seem not the donor but the recipient of her votive offering. Once we make this equation, other elements of the picture begin to fall into place. The bird sitting on the bride’s shoulder, presumably having entered the church through the window, becomes the dove of the Holy Spirit, who has infused the Church with grace. The landscape seen through the windows becomes what the bride sees, eyes being windows to the soul, and also what lies within her breast. Specifically, the hart outside the left window both puns on “heart” and represents, in the Celtic myths and Arthurian legends Jones loved, an invitation to a mystical quest, drawing us out from our walled enclosure into the world beyond. In sum, the relationship between the Bride-Church and the world outside her is marked by an interchange of spiritual desire.

This spiritual desire, however, exists uneasily alongside a desire more carnal. The bride's translucent sleeves, lacy dress, and silk ribbons are distractingly erotic. Though she wears a veil, our eyes are drawn to the bright expanse of her bare neck and décolletage, the twin curves of which are visually echoed by the twin loops of a bow-tie hovering over them, almost exactly in the center of the woodcut. The ribbons emphasize that the bride is not being spied upon, but rather has intentionally put her beauty on display. Her eyes gaze past the spiritual bird to the flame of the candle that she holds, and this candle, which she grasps as if it were a pen, has an erotic subtext as well as a ritual significance. She may allegorically represent the Bride of Christ, but she also seems very human.

How we understand the relationship between these two aspects depends, I think, on how we read her facial expression. In some moods the curve of her lip will become almost a sneer, and she will strike the viewer as wantonly cruel, impaling a candle onto an unusually violent-looking candle-stand (one whose circular shape makes it look almost like a crown of thorns). In other moods, her unfocused eyes will suggest a meditative remove, as her gaze looks past the bird and the candle-flame to an interior contemplation of her wedding night. It would be difficult to rule out either of these readings, for both the bride's vision and our vision of the bride seem intentionally opaque. This opacity is reflected in the texture of the image itself, regarding which a comparison with *Soldiers Dicing* is instructive: where the sketch conforms its representation to a numbered grid, the woodcut fractures it between multiple blocks of wood awkwardly screwed together. Blank seams run up, down, and across the page, not in an act of violent comprehension, as the gridlines of *Soldiers Dicing* attempt, but as if refraining from any claim to special insight. It would, then, be a mistake to insist on either cruelty or contemplation

to the exclusion of the other, just as it would have been to pinpoint the relationship between reader and “expensive delicate ship” in Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts.”

We come now to the more improbable of my claims regarding these two works: that the bride’s attitude towards Christ somehow resembles the ship’s attitude towards Icarus; that in the world of this woodcut, as in that of Auden’s *Old Masters*, “even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course | Anyhow in a corner.” Taken realistically, the claim seems silly, since the bare legs in *The Bride* are not those of a suffering Christ, but rather those of a sculpted Crucifix, and so the Bride has no alternative to “turn[ing] away | Quite leisurely from the disaster.” I would suggest, however, that such a realistic interpretation of *The Bride* is unwarranted, given the way the image rejects any sharp ontological division between the world of art and the world of life. Consider the flesh of the life-sized crucifix, and its uncanny resemblance to the flesh of the bride. We would expect the one to look like a sculpture, the other like a living body, but instead the woodcut makes them seem to inhabit the same level of reality. As in a cartoon, where every object on screen is equally animated,<sup>26</sup> the viewer feels that either the crucifix is as alive as the bride, or she is as monumental as it.

The result of this blurring of boundaries is that the bride in *The Bride* comes to inhabit an analogous position to the soldiers in *Soldiers Dicing*. As the soldiers play dice instead of looking at the cross, so the Bride, instead of looking at the cross, lights a candle. We do not sense the difference between them to reside in the ontological status of their respective crosses, but rather in the spiritual status of their respective responses to it. The attitude of the soldiers

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley Cavell writes that “The world inhabited by animated creatures is typically also animated; it may not remain the stable background of the actions of the live figures, but act on its own. It is animistic” (Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 169).

seems an almost nihilistic alienation from the suffering Christ: the soldiers refuse to do anything about it and so say that they cannot do anything about it, that it is mere fate, an unlucky throw of the dice. The bride's lighting of a candle seems closer to the furrowing of Auden's ploughman. The ploughman is not a nihilist, but only a man living in a world wherein we must occasionally be ignorant of others' suffering and must desire and act on our desires regardless. So too, I would suggest, is the bride—and, like Auden's poem, Jones's woodcut describes this situation without telling us what should be our attitude towards it. The bride's lighting a candle does not achieve any definite relationship with the suffering Christ. At best, we might say, it refuses to foreclose the possibility of such a relation.

Jones's development between *Soldiers Dicing* and *The Bride* and Auden's analogous development between "The Watershed" and "Musée des Beaux Arts" consists first of all in this shift of mood, from anxious paralysis to calm perplexity and openness. It is not that these authors have discovered how to fit suffering into the landscape, but rather that they have come to see their inability in a different light. The earlier works saw clearly that they could not see clearly the wounded humanity they knew to be present everywhere around them. That recognition induced in them a despair of ever achieving true communication; the author and audience alike were transformed into soldiers or strangers whose could only escape their subjectivity by subjecting the outside world to themselves. The later works do not escape the failure of perception from which the earlier works suffered; indeed, they emblemize it in the alienated legs of Icarus or of Christ. But instead of inhabiting that failure alone, these works set up within it a figure of community: the candle-lighting bride who is also the Church she kneels within; the ploughman whose furrow echoes the ship's wake.

Both candle and plow are practical tools with strong symbolic overtones, suggesting both the erotic (the flame of desire, the blade plunging into earth) and the poetic (the light of insight, the seeds of genius). The ploughman and bride are, however, at best ambiguous symbols for the authors of these works. Auden's ploughman does not look at Icarus because he has something else to do, but Auden himself dwells on Icarus at length, and can find no place in Icarus's world from which to adequately view him. Jones is similarly absent from the world of *The Bride*. Miles and Shiel put the situation well: "Images of sacrifice, sexuality and penetration come together in a stressed vision of a ceremony in which Jones could play no principal part."<sup>27</sup> To speak biographically, Jones can play no part because, by this point in his life, his engagement had been broken off and he knew he would likely never be married. But he can play no part also because this woodcut, like this poem, does not offer a definite point of view on the problem it elucidates. We cannot settle on an evaluation of the activities of their figures, or their relationship to the half-visible suffering they overlook. Nevertheless we marvel at the "expensive delicacy" of the ship's sails and at the bride's veil and floral dress and bouquet. These figures' vulnerable beauty does not account for every instance of suffering, but itself enters our view as something for which we must account and which promises the possibility of such an accounting.

### 3. Human Landscapes

In the first pair of works we considered, the author beheld a landscape separated from himself which he had to find some way to behold; in the second, he sought to identify himself

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<sup>27</sup> Miles and Shiel, *David Jones*, 260–1.

with an imperfect but vulnerably beautiful community which sometimes does, sometimes does not perceive the suffering of its members. Impersonality, we might say, gave way to anonymity, the transparent eyeball gave up its “I” and became a “we.” In doing so, however, the later works abandoned any possibility of a personal voice, of identifying with the individual suffering members, the drowning Icarus and the crucified Christ. *The Bride* and “Musée des Beaux Arts” provide those who encounter them little sense of what it might mean for the entire community to perceive fully the suffering of one of its members, nor, contrariwise, what it might mean for any one member to perceive fully the suffering of the entire community. The spectacle of suffering threatens the community’s integrity, which can be preserved only by partially averting one’s gaze.

When we leap once more a decade forward, the situation has again altered. The author has re-entered the scene by inviting suffering upon himself, and exhibiting himself as existing within and blending into the landscape. He invites others to behold him, no longer as a transparent eyeball, but as a corporeal frame, providing structure to a real, finite, contested human community. Such, I suggest, is the effect of the two final works I will consider here, Jones’s frontispiece to *In Parenthesis*, completed in 1936, the year before the book’s publication,<sup>28</sup> and Auden’s “In Praise of Limestone,” written in 1948, a decade after “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Like *Soldiers Dicing* and “The Watershed” two decades earlier, these pieces stand at the threshold of new phases in their authors’ careers, recapitulating earlier motifs but transmuting them into an entirely new aesthetic.

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<sup>28</sup> According to Thomas Dilworth’s dating (Dilworth, *David Jones*, 184).

The decade between 1938 and 1948 saw more transformations than any other in Auden's career. When it began, Auden was politically and spiritually adrift, disillusioned with leftist politics after his time in Spain but still greatly concerned about the political future of Europe. In the span of a few years he moved to America, fell in love, found his love betrayed, and saw the European world descend once more into war; his response was to become a Christian in the Kierkegaardian vein. When the war ended he toured Germany to study civilian responses to bombing, and the next year became a United States citizen; soon after he began summering in Italy and adopted a less existential, more liturgical Anglo-Catholic Christianity. His poetry especially in the middle of these years, say, 1941–45, divides into roughly two categories: on the one hand, a series of ambitious, large-scale, structurally complex works; on the other, a smaller number of lyric-length poems tending, however, not towards song so much as obscure gnomic riddle. (Later chapters will consider some of the longer works, while the gnomic poems I leave for other critics.) "In Praise of Limestone," the first poem of Auden's Italian phase, introduced a new tone into his oeuvre; as Mendelson puts it, the poem "sounds like nothing that he had written before."<sup>29</sup> At the same time, it returned to the geological theme that had dominated his earliest poetry, most memorably preserved in "The Watershed." As David Rosen has detailed, Auden apparently resurrected the theme, without admitting that he was doing so, in order to rewrite its meaning: "With impressive thoroughness, Auden revisits and desublimates the landscape of his earlier poems, finding history and allegory where once he found an unutterable, suggestive power."<sup>30</sup> We need not agree with Rosen's negative evaluation

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<sup>29</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 602.

<sup>30</sup> Rosen, *Plain English*, 169.

of the poem to recognize his description to be essentially correct. “In Praise of Limestone” conflates the island of Ischia with Auden’s native Pennine hills, and in doing so offers a new, historically inflected understanding of how the poet can relate allegorically to the human landscape around him.

Since Auden’s poem, among his most famous, has been the subject of extensive commentary,<sup>31</sup> I will postpone looking at it until after I consider Jones’s frontispiece, at which point I will limit my remarks to defining the comparison I wish to make between the two. The first point of my comparison is the place of the work in the poet’s oeuvre: Jones’s frontispiece, I have suggested, was pivotal for him in much the way “In Praise of Limestone” had been for Auden. Now, compared to the seismic shifts Auden experienced in the early forties, Jones’s life between *The Bride* and the *In Parenthesis* frontispiece was far less tumultuous intellectually—personally, however, it was perhaps even more so. His engagement to Eric Gill’s daughter having just been broken off, Jones spent the years around 1930 working at a fevered pitch both writing *In Parenthesis* and painting numerous landscapes, seascapes, floral still lifes, and portraits of his friends.

*In Parenthesis* I discuss in chapter five. The contemporaneous paintings I will not discuss at length, but it will be worthwhile for me to specify how they do and how they do not fit into the narrative I am sketching. Miles and Shiel described these works as manifesting an “idiosyncratic blend of mystical Expressionism,”<sup>32</sup> and the analogy with contemporary German

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<sup>31</sup> The best place to begin is the symposium on the poem in Auden, *In Solitude, for Company*, 245–272. Hecht, “On W. H. Auden’s ‘In Praise of Limestone’” offers a helpful survey of the poem’s attitude toward the Italian landscape and Baroque aesthetic.

<sup>32</sup> Miles and Shiel, *David Jones*, 130.





*Illustration 4: David Jones, Frontispiece to In Parenthesis, 1936, pencil, watercolor, and ink on paper, 38 by 28 cm. Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum of Wales. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, reproduced with permission.*

painting is helpful, though we must be careful not to take it too far. Expressionism thrives in genres, like those Jones favored in these years, in which the object of representation matters less in its own right than as an occasion for expressive vision. For Jones, this vision was not to be understood as a private, subjective experience, but as insight into the truth of the object. Nevertheless, his paintings at this time rarely captured any intrinsically dramatic or significant scene; instead, they offered expressive glimpses into the artist's perception of the ordinary material surface. The landscapes and still lifes never contain human forms, and the portraits rarely suggest any interplay between the eyes of the figure and the eyes of the artist.<sup>33</sup> Put differently, these works contain an artistic vision, but they are not *about* artistic vision, about how the eye and the body relate to one another, as *Soldiers Dicing* and *The Bride* had both been.

That focus returned to Jones's artwork with the 1936 frontispiece, catalyzed by three events: the completion of *In Parenthesis* itself; the trip to the Holy Land which so shaped the later revisions of the *In Parenthesis* manuscript; and the 1934 mental breakdown which made the trip necessary in the first place. As had happened for Auden in Italy, Jones found in the Holy Land a new perspective on the relation between history and embodiment, one which led him to revisit a central theme of his earliest work. For the second time, if we take *Soldiers Dicing* to have been the first, Jones's imagination was caught by the analogy between two occupying forces: on the one hand, modern British soldiers, and on the other, ancient Roman

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<sup>33</sup> An intriguing exception, to my mind, is "Petra im Rosenhag" (1932). This painting's almost Kandinsky-like surface of brightly colored squiggles scattered across mostly empty space nevertheless insists on its titular figure's significance, implicitly comparing her to the anonymous Renaissance painting "Madonna im Rosenhag," and asking, with her coy glance out at the viewer, whether she herself is aware of this comparison, and whether she intends to invite it: "Is Petra *playing* the Virgin?"

legionaries. This analogy, and a generally analogical approach to history, pervaded his visual art when he returned to painting in the second half of the decade. Though he adapted the technique he had developed earlier in the decade of combining watercolor, pencil, and ink to achieve simultaneously ethereal translucency and sharply defined detail, he put these tools to new use, painting not expressive snippets of ordinary perception but rather panoramic scenes of extraordinary allusive density.

This stylistic advance first surfaces with the *In Parenthesis* frontispiece. Here, as in the earlier works, the watercolor pays little heed to the figuration, striving instead for subtle light effects; most of the page is covered in a shimmering gray, with patches of dull red marking the soldier's blood, hints of blue on the horse, the buckle, and in arcs across the sky, and large patches of pale white radiating out from the crescent moon. But now within this nimbus a complex scene has been written in pencil. In the upper-left corner, soldiers run and carry large objects amidst a grove of shattered trees; in the foreground beneath, a shovel leans against a twisted fence of barbed wire; rats made by a trick of perspective as large as the soldiers scurry to the right of the wire through a tangle of nets; above them, a line of soldiers marches into another grove, separated from the first by a distant village; in the sky above, moon and stars hang in the night sky.

Center-stage, occupying most of the frame, stands the figure of a half-nude soldier, leg bleeding, enmeshed in the wire, arms awkwardly akimbo. He is drawn in far greater detail than the other figures, which are really little more than outlines—except that his genitals are less a representation than an ideogram, simultaneously a minuscule weapon and a vulnerable point; it takes the place of his gun, which is nowhere to be seen. Ink has been applied sparingly, to

reinforce certain outlines, mostly on the platoon in the background, in places around the coat worn by the central figure but nowhere on the margin of his bare flesh. Miles and Shiel perceptively note the tension this difference creates between flesh and coat: “Arms askance, awkward like broken trees, he fights with the remnant of his uniform. Is he struggling to equip his natural innocence for his task or is he making the humane plea that all this martial panoply must be discarded?”<sup>34</sup> I find most plausible, however, a third alternative, that his state of dress or undress is no doing of his, but rather of external forces: his clothing, like Christ’s tunic for which the soldiers dice, has been stripped from him. By no choice of his own, the figure is caught halfway between bare humanity and armed soldiery. Insofar as he is soldier, he exists separate from the landscape, insofar as he is human, he blends into it, and it blends into him, such that the viewer must linger over both if she is to discern one from the other.

In so lingering, the viewer notices that figure and ground also share a common shape: his arm on our right silvered by the moonlight, that on our left dark under his coat, look like limbs of the two closest trees, one dark, one light, whose severed boughs are like hands clutching the sky. In *Soldiers Dicing*, the figures in the foreground were cut off from the landscape behind them. Here, the iconic central figure stands amidst the path down which the line of soldiers marches towards the very battlefield to which he somehow relates. We should pause, here, to specify the nature of that relation. Thomas Dilworth writes: “In his psychological and physical desolation, the infantryman personifies the landscape.”<sup>35</sup> But I do not think this is quite correct, for the figure does not merely personify the landscape, he has

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>35</sup> Dilworth, *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*, 63.

helped to shape it. With his hands like withered trees, he becomes one with the no-man's-land Jones described in his preface as full of "sharp contours and unformed voids."<sup>36</sup> But with the shovel that stands in the dirt beside him, he becomes one who digs trenches into that land, shaping the entrenched culture, the "intimate, continuing domestic life of small contingents of men."<sup>37</sup> Many elements of the picture—the rats, the moonlight, the blue horse—can be fully interpreted only in light of the specifics of that culture, as conveyed through the private symbol-world of that book. But it is difficult to miss that he digs into, makes himself at home in, covers himself with the very earth which is in turn remade in the image of the soldier. Only a single patch of land, on the right edge of the page, is devoid of any mark of human habitation, and it is toward this patch that the line of soldiers seems to march, bringing form to the unformed.

In being a maker, an artist, as well as in being a wounded soldier sensually displayed, the central figure of the frontispiece takes on an autobiographical quality. We can sense this even if we do not know that the figure's visage somewhat resembles that of Jones himself, or that Jones, too, was wounded in the leg. I do not mean that the frontispiece is a self-portrait, but rather that the wounded soldier gives an inescapable impression of standing to the world around him much as the Jonesian artist stands to his artwork. At the same time, extending his arms in the shape of a T, the soldier has unmistakably been imaginatively crucified. As Jones later insisted (an insistence I will explore further in chapter four), this does not mean that he dies for the sins of the world. More plausibly, I would suggest, he suffers in the act of contributing to (though not founding) the community, and the observer sees his still suffering to

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<sup>36</sup> Jones, *In Parenthesis* x.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* ix.

be the unexpected epitome of the frenetic activity surrounding him. Half-naked, fragile genitalia sensually displayed, he exhibits himself as an example not of any moral ideal but simply of human being in the world. He suffers but his face is not a mask of suffering; rather it seems inscrutable, as if, looking on nothing at all—certainly not the moon, on which he has turned his back—he contemplates his own pain, and how it reshapes him just as it reshapes the moonlit landscape around him.

Having described Jones's frontispiece in this way, the comparison with Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" will not be too surprising, for the poem as well is about the speaker's identification with a landscape of suffering and erotic mutability. I do not mean to deny that the frontispiece concerns itself with brutal warfare, while the poem seems at times more worried about bad opera singers. Taken as wholes, however, both are concerned, not with the alien or the human, but with the contrast between them, and their intertwining. Jones's frontispiece shows the soldiers moving out of what he saw as almost cozy domestic trenches into the violently estranging no-man's-land. Auden's poem, likewise, pivots on the contrast between the seedy inconstancy of those "accustomed to a stone that responds" and the incomprehensible inhumanity of those from "granite wastes," "clays and gravels," and "oceanic whisper," whose personalities recall those which Auden had in previous works held responsible for the horrors of modern war.

Auden sees the same impulses that would lead to war in the limestone landscape's "band of rivals" who each suffer from the "child's wish | To receive more attention than his brothers." But like the soldiers in their warren of traverses and dugouts, these figures are saved from annihilation by limestone's "secret system of caves and conduits": space in a brutally



disproportionate world for a home proportionate to humanity, a “region | Of short distances and definite spaces.” Both poets are concerned with how a provisional home can be found within the violence of history, refusing to deny that home’s provisionality:

They were right, my dear, all those voices were right  
And still are; this land is not the sweet home that it looks,  
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site  
Where something was settled once and for all:

The home is fashioned out of the mutable earth, which becomes a picture of human nature, the proper body of “we, the inconstant ones,” whose faults can be acknowledged and perhaps reformed. This makes the poem less an exercise in the pathetic fallacy, the coloring of an object by the crises internal to some subject, than an attempt to revive allegory by placing geology, anthropology, and theology into analogical relationships.<sup>38</sup>

The final verse paragraph makes the goal of such an analogical outlook explicit: “it disturbs our rights,” which is to say our complacencies regarding what counts as a properly human life. The land offers an image of what that life could look like through “These modifications of matter into | Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,” marble statues which suggest how “The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from, | Having nothing to hide.” These statues play a similar role to Jones’s half-nude soldier, a sign simultaneously of the holy and the naively sensual. The first verse paragraph, finding this lack of shame nothing to be ashamed of, suggests the Freudian angle more forcefully:<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 540–2.

<sup>39</sup> I quote here from Auden’s 1958 revision. The original describes “the nude young male who lounges | Against a rock displaying his dildo.” Ironically, this revision seems motivated in part by the kind of embarrassment this passage disavows, though Auden insisted that his goal was not to remove the word “dildo” but rather to improve the meter.

What could be more like Mother or a fitter background  
For her son, the flirtatious male who lounges  
Against a rock in the sunlight, never doubting  
That for all his faults he is loved; whose works are but  
Extensions of his power to charm?

We could take this comparison of the poet with the narcissistic son to be an admission of poetic guilt. As Lucy McDiarmid has shown, Auden's later work as a whole is obsessed with poetic temptation, flirting with it even as it attempts to protect itself from it: these poems' "vanity is inextricable from their art. Showing off on the stage of the text, with flowing scripts and marginal decorations, they can only achieve greater awareness of their incorrigibility."<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the attitude of the narcissistic son might seem not to be the poet's attitude so much as the attitude he wishes he could inhabit. The son lives blessedly in the moment while we are condemned to self-consciousness. I do not think either of these is quite right. "In Praise of Limestone" does not approach the lounging son the way "The Watershed" would, as a sign of psychic unity unavailable to those who inhabit the position of observer. Neither, however, do we take it that, in writing this poem, Auden has garishly exposed himself to us. If the statue simply were Auden, just as if the soldier simply were Jones, then the self-revelation would be mere narcissism. Instead, as with the soldier, the nude statue is not quite a confessional self-portrait, but nevertheless comes to signify the poet's act of self-revelation. What the statue displays is not any particular subject, but human nature.

This universality extends to the confession of guilt that appears unexpectedly near the end of the poem. After the opening "we," the poem speaks for the most part in an impersonally conversational key, superficially similar to the free verse of "Musée des Beaux Arts," but now

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<sup>40</sup> McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, 6.



conformed to a barely perceptible syllabic meter (a rhythm than runs gently beneath the surface). Near the end, however, through what Michael Wood describes as the “delicate shifting of registers [...] the play of pronouns and perspectives,”<sup>41</sup> the poem announces an intimacy of “I” with “you”: “I, too, am reproached, for what I know and how much you know.” Though the context suggests that the guilt in question is sexual, it matters that no specific accusation is made, for the content of the reproach matters less than its source. It does not come from the people around the poet (in which case the poet could easily shrug it off), but from “this land” itself:

It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself  
It does not neglect, but calls into question  
All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights.

The contrast here with the apostrophe of “The Watershed” is stark. Rather than the land refusing to communicate, the poet presents the land, that is, his own sensual self, as having communicated a self-reproach, albeit without making any report. The poem ends with an appeal to forgiveness, one which not only depends on a four-fold repetition of the singular first-person pronoun but which also stations that pronoun against a term even more intimate than the earlier “you”:

Dear, I know nothing of  
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love  
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur  
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

If the reader accepts this rhetorical intimacy, taking himself to be “Dear,” then he at the same time accepts that he is made of the same modifiable matter as the speaker, who begins the poem, recall, by summoning “we, the inconstant ones.” Hazzarding a hyperbolic reading, I might

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<sup>41</sup> Wood, “In Praise of Limestone,” 250.

say that Auden addresses, first and foremost, the very landscape he has been describing, which is his own flesh, and only secondarily all others who can find their own flesh also in that flawed landscape.

In Auden's, which is also Jones's, emphasis on the fallibility of the fleshly landscape, we arrive at the central distinction between their poetics and that of Emerson's divine transparent eyeball. For Emerson, nature is a healing fountain, repairing "disgrace" and "calamity" by eliminating the source of disgrace and calamity, namely, human finitude. Absorbing the landscape into itself, the Emersonian eyeball finds itself "nothing," vanished from the scene, and through this self-negation is apotheosized, becoming "part and parcel of God." When Jones and Auden discover in dismay that the landscape does not leave them "uplifted into infinite spaces," but rather painfully alienated from their fellow human beings, they realize that the poet of landscape must become in fact the opposite of a transparent eyeball: a wounded, inconstant, mutable body. This body can exemplify human being not through exceptional virtue or through exceptional suffering, but through being made exceptionally visible. In seeing it together with the social landscape in which it is situated, with all its fluid play of pain and pleasure, guilt and forgiveness, concealment and revelation, we do not see the shape of what we might become, but have the opportunity to acknowledge what we already are.

### CHAPTER 3: RITUALS OF RECOGNITION

While examining Jones's and Auden's responses to modernist impersonality we touched obliquely on two issues which deserve closer attention, especially since, though the connection is not obvious, the two turn out to be deeply intertwined.

The first issue involves the relationship between art and religion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their commitments to liturgical Christianity, religious imagery abounded in the works of both poets that we considered: Jones turned over and over to the crucifixion; Auden looked in "Musée des Beaux Arts" looked at paintings of the Nativity, and ended "In Praise of Limestone" with an echo of the Apostle's creed concerning belief in "the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." But if the presence of this imagery is not surprising, still a question arises as to how to understand it. They do not, apparently, purport to be aids to worship: Jones's images would not fit comfortably into the decor of a Catholic chapel, and we are not tempted to read Auden's poems as acts of prayer. What, then, do these works of art have to do with the acts of religious devotion on which they seem to depend?

The second issue involves the relationship between disparate aesthetic media. *The Bride* and "Musée des Beaux Arts" are both in part about our relationship with works of art, and so we see in them works of one medium translated into another: a woodcut image of a sculpture in a romanesque building, a poetic ekphrasis on three baroque paintings. With "In Praise of Limestone" Auden expands his purview to encompass architecture, marble sculpture, and music, called "our common comfort." The frontispiece to *In Parenthesis*, finally, combines the

elusive atmospherics of watercolor with the quasi-ideogrammatic effects of pen and pencil, and does so in an image meant to illustrate a book-length poem. Though we should not conclude too much from these glances at other media, it seems apparent that Jones and Auden sought to understand, not poetry or painting or sculpture or music on their own, but artistic making writ large. What happens when these authors push further into the territory that lies between the specific arts?

To answer both the question about art and religion, and the question about art and the arts, we should return to a topic broached in the first chapter, that of the analogy between art and ritual. I'll begin by sketching the significance of the analogy as Jones and Auden inherited it. Inspired by contemporary anthropological research, authors like Yeats, Joyce, Pound, and the early Eliot tended to envision their work as a kind of ritual. This had implications for the content of their work, as they speculated that literature could gain in power by drawing upon myths of the Dying God. But it also promised to change their understanding of what their work could do. If ritual is a genus containing the species both of artistic object and of religious act, then art ought to have a quasi-religious power to bind together its participants into a new community. Usually, however, this binding power remains a vague metaphor, because it is difficult to specify when and where the community takes shape. We can describe actions like our looking at an artwork, or the painter's painting of it, or our reading a poem, or the poet's writing of it, as rituals, but absent further specification this is little more than flowery language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This problem pervades attempts to discuss ritual in modernist poetry; see, for example, Korg, *Ritual and Experiment in Modern Poetry*.

The analogy begins to make more sense when we consider another, complementary meaning these poets assign to the word “ritual”: a ritual is for them a purified form of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a spectacle from which human affect had been removed without erasing the unity of image, sound, and word in a single hieroglyph of meaning.<sup>2</sup> A modernist ritual, then, does not appeal to the aesthetic judgment of eye or ear or tongue, but rather constructs a new *sensus communis*, in both the Aristotelian and the Kantian senses of the term. It unites various sensory experiences into a novel consciousness of a unified world other than our own; at the same time, it unites the various members of its audience into a community that, for the duration of the ritual, inhabits that other world. Where is the ritual-making artist in all of this? As Joyce’s mouthpiece Stephen Daedalus puts it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “the artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”<sup>3</sup> The artist does not participate in the ritually inaugurated *sensus communis*, but rather orchestrates it.

This richer sense of poetic ritual made a strong impression on both Jones and Auden near the beginnings of their careers, one similar in importance, and directly related, to their early exposure to theories of aesthetic impersonality. The year after “The Watershed,” Auden wrote *Paid on Both Sides: A Charade*, less a story about imagined characters than a ritual invocation of the desolate, alienated landscape the earlier poem envisions, a vision of endless feuding unsuccessfully interrupted by the dream-figure of Father Xmas. By the generic tag *charade*, Auden later wrote, he meant that this work did not engage in “the analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, especially the chapters on “Hieroglyph” and “Noh.”

<sup>3</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist and a Young Man*, 233.

character,” to which drama was not particularly suited, but rather enacted “an art of the body” that would also be “the act of a whole community.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, two years after abandoning the planned oil painting of soldiers dicing at the foot of the cross, Jones undertook his first large-scale project, a mural of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem. Covering all four walls of the converted barn in which apprentice artists slept, “Cum Floribus et Palmis” owes much to the hieratic aesthetic that predominated at Eric Gill’s Ditchling Common community, just as its religious theme and decorative nature link it to Gill’s pragmatic theory of art. The mural would not have been an object of aesthetic contemplation, prompting the viewer to relate its various components to one another, but rather would have surrounded the viewer as he went about his business and prompted him, whenever he noticed any particular scene, to seek out its predetermined relation to his own life. While not aspiring to create a foundational ritual, the mural plays an auxiliary role in the larger Ditchling attempt at such a foundation, acting as a kind of liturgical set dressing.

The theatrical associations of this last phrase, and the fact that *Paid on Both Sides* is essentially a drama, are no coincidence. If ritual involves a director, an audience, and a spectacle uniting image, sound, and word, then it unavoidably converges on a kind of theatrical performance; as Michael Fried puts it, “what lies *between* the arts is theater.”<sup>5</sup> Many of the most significant modernist experiments with ritual (for example, Yeats’s Noh plays) were in fact literal works of theater. But they were, at the same time, anti-theatrical, not in the sense that they hoped to abolish theater, but in the sense that they hoped utterly to transform it, just as

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<sup>4</sup> Auden, *Prose* I:128.

<sup>5</sup> Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 164.

contemporary modernist experiments with impersonal abstraction hoped to transform poetry, music, and painting. Indeed, we might say that anti-theatricality is just impersonality applied to the theater: as Martin Puchner has argued, modernist suspicion of the theater centered on the actor's embodied personhood, and how it both manifested a habitual sentimentality and provoked the same in the spectator.<sup>6</sup> This suspicion united, in time-honored Platonic fashion, the moral threat of theater's deceptive nature (the sentiment was false, as personality is a mask) with the metaphysical threat of the body's indefinite materiality (the sentiment was neither true nor false, it was not even intentional, as personality is irrational). Modernist ritual, an anti-theatrical form of theater, hoped to avoid both hypocrisy and haphazardness by staging a spectacle which acquired meaning in a quite different manner than do ordinary human actions. Its search for a novel *sensus communis* was an attempt to overturn the conventional common sense of the personalized human body.

Now, all theatrical performances differ from ordinary life. For example, when a character on stage receives a wound, it obviously does not mean that we should come to the actor's aid. The staging must inevitably propose a different idea of what the event means, hence of how events mean. As Roland Barthes puts it, "the theater is that practice which calculates the *observed* place of things," and (therefore) "the tableau is the presentation of ideal meaning."<sup>7</sup> This presentation, when it is felt to be significant (and it is not always), can be approached in various ways. I would suggest that these fall into three basic categories, three ideal types of theatrical tableau. First, the scream: the theater can try to short-circuit

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<sup>6</sup> Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," 69.

sentimental conventions through the contagion of expressed sensation. Second, the *gestus*: it can try to make the audience aware of the contingency of these conventions through direct political confrontation. Finally, the hieroglyph: it can try to establish a new set of conventions through a ceremony of abstract significance.<sup>8</sup> The last of these, of course, includes the ritual theater which I above associated with the British high modernists, as well as the early works by Jones and Auden. Our question, then, to return to our principal authors, has become whether Jones and Auden's work fits equally well into this category. The answer, I will argue, is no; neither, however, does it fit into either of the remaining two.

The two works I will consider in detail in this chapter, Jones's illustrations for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Auden's "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," are not theatrical works in the narrowest sense, in that they are not texts for performance. But they are theatrical more broadly speaking: combining various media (image and poetry, poetry and music) so as to concern themselves with ideal meaning and the contours of the *sensus communis*. The way they understand those contours is not quite ritual, not quite political, and not quite sensational, though it is closest to the first of these. These works accept that there exists a non-aesthetic form of meaning-making, the religious; they deny, however, the suggestion of the high modernist ritualists that art transcends ordinary meaning, for to say so would be to collapse art with religion. These works accept the

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<sup>8</sup> This taxonomy synthesizes the accounts offered by Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* and Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*. Worthen, whose focus is on modifications of the traditional theater in the twentieth century, identifies three main strategies, the realist-expressionist, the poetic, and the political. Albright, who considers modernist attempts to coordinate the various arts into a unified whole, identifies three basic methods for doing so, which he terms hieroglyph, *gestus*, and the neologism "villonaud," that is, a work which plucks directly at the blood and nerves.



contingency of art's conventions of meaning-making, since, after all, there exist at least two forms of meaning-making, the religious and the artistic; they refuse, however, the political propagandists' equation of contingency with alienating relativity, insisting that the contingent *sensus communis* of humanity can be reasonably inhabited. Finally, these works depend on embodied experience, but they refuse the expressionist reduction of experience to irrational affect, instead showing how the human body can recognize its place within the order of the larger world. In brief, Jones's illustrations and Auden's oratorio offer an alternative to all three types of ideal meaning, hieroglyph, gestus, and scream.

We can describe this alternative, albeit in terms alien to Jones and Auden, as an attempt to recognize the meaningfulness of ordinary human action, and, what comes to the same thing, to recognize the reasonableness of such acts of recognition. This reasonableness is rejected by each of the three modernist anti-theatricalities just sketched: for the sensationalists, recognition cannot be reasonable because it takes place unconsciously and automatically; for the politicians, because its results are underdetermined and so arbitrary; for the ritualists, because it does not discover, but instead invents, the meaning it claims to see. For Jones and Auden, however, to make an artwork is to render visible one's recognition of something about the world. In the first section of this chapter I will show how recognition becomes a central theme of both the illustrations and the oratorio: both find their subject matter to itself be about recognition, and its relationship to guilt, forgiveness, freedom, and happiness. The second section will consider this theme in relation to these works' symmetries of form, which I take to emphasize corresponding asymmetries of content. In the final section I will offer a close reading of two

pairs of linked scenes from each work, showing how these asymmetrical diptychs seek to distinguish sacred from secular, and blindness from recognition.

## 1. Vision and Blessing

These works are about recognition, to begin with, in the particular way that they respond to their source material. Jones's illustrations for Coleridge's poem and Auden's oratorio of scenes from the gospels of Matthew and Luke do not re-enact their originals, as if the original were itself merely an enactment of some third thing which was the real object of interest. Neither do they revise their originals, as if the original were merely a heap of rubble to be mined and reconstituted as the new author sees fit. While the former approach is deferential and the latter audacious, they share a reluctance to linger with the earlier work itself, as if rewriting were a means to avoid reading. This reluctance, I am suggesting, is absent from the works we will look at here. The illustrations and the oratorio take great care to keep their originals in view, and I will suggest, further, that they are to a significant extent about this keeping in view, and the care it requires.

To see what I mean, consider Jones's illustrations, and their relationship to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Soon after his move to Ditchling David Jones began a brief career working with fine art presses, engraving woodcut illustrations for editions of works such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1925), *The Book of Jonah* (1926), and *The Chester Play of the Deluge* (1927). Each of these texts had been assigned by the publisher, but in 1927 Jones was offered a commission to illustrate a text of his choice, this time to be done not in woodcut but in copperplate. Jones selected Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a favorite poem from

his youth.<sup>9</sup> He took two years to complete the eight engravings, plus smaller frontispiece and tailpiece, and the edition was published in 1929. The woodcut *The Bride*, discussed last chapter, was completed the next year, and in fact descends from unused sketches for the first *Ancient Mariner* print.<sup>10</sup> No less than *The Bride*, the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations make allegorical use of architecture, concern themselves with marriage and the body politic, and emphasize the painfully erotic distance between observer and observed.<sup>11</sup>

The illustrations differ from *The Bride*, however, in that they present not a single scene we struggle to decipher, but a series of eight tableaux, individually perspicuous, but ambiguously related to one another.<sup>12</sup> The viewer must somehow find in these eight a unity not spatial but temporal. After all, appearing in a codex in parallel to the temporal sequence of

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<sup>9</sup> Afterword to Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 83–84.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> An autobiographical explanation for these themes is tempting: Jones began the *Ancient Mariner* prints in the wake of his wrecked engagement, when he first began to realize that being an artist might preclude him from entering other walks of life. Small wonder, then, that he chose to illustrate a poem that ends in the Wedding Guest catching the Mariner's curse and remaining outside the wedding feast. There is some truth here, but we should not be naive about the relationship between art and life. The causation might have been the other way round: Jones's contemplation of the *Ancient Mariner* led him to suspect that artists ought not to get married, which led him to put off setting a date for the marriage, which led Petra to break off the engagement.

<sup>12</sup> This difference is in part simply that between woodcut and copperplate, and so characterizes the contrast between the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations and all of Jones's earlier illustrations. The dense hatching of Jones's woodcuts force the viewer to linger over them, painstakingly piecing them together; it is these, as much as Jones's watercolors, that lead some critics to remark how Jones's art requires long viewing before its coherence becomes apparent. Jones's copperplates, in contrast, almost conform to Clement Greenberg's dictum for modernist art, which Michael Fried later took up: "the whole of the picture should be taken in at a glance; its unity should be immediately evident" (Greenberg, "The Case for Abstract Art," 80). Unlike the art Greenberg and Fried championed, however, the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations use their immediacy to escape abstract form, toward which Jones's work often tends. They do not allow us to forget that they portray bodies which themselves possess the power of sight, which is to say, that they are composed of a series of dramatic tableaux.

Coleridge's poem, the prints can be viewed only one at a time, and at a time set aside for the task, before and after which they will be out of sight upon a shelf. The illustrations differ in this from the *Cum Floribus* murals, which create a backdrop surrounding the viewer throughout the day. This difference of media corresponds, I would suggest, to the difference in these works' subject matters: The murals depict the life of Christ, which ought always to be at the back of every Christian's mind, and so the murals themselves hover in the background, infusing Christ's spirit into whatever is done within sight of them. The illustrations, in contrast, center on the Ancient Mariner, a figure both more marginal and of more ambiguous significance, and so they sit out of sight when the book is closed and, upon its being opened, invite us to work out both his and their meaning.

I take this to be the import of Plate 5, which illustrates the climactic moment of Coleridge's poem. In Part IV, at the half-way mark of the *Ancient Mariner*, the curse the Mariner has incurred by shooting the albatross is lifted through what I would call an act of recognition<sup>13</sup>:

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.

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<sup>13</sup> Coleridge, *The Major Works*, 57. Citations henceforth by page number.

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea.

In the poem's terms, we see here an act of blessing, coextensive with an outpouring of love and a vision of happiness, freeing the Mariner from the weight of his sin, and allowing him to pray. The moral of the story seems tidy enough, and the poem's concluding motto seeks to reinforce this impression: "He prayeth well who loveth well | Both man and bird and beast" (67).

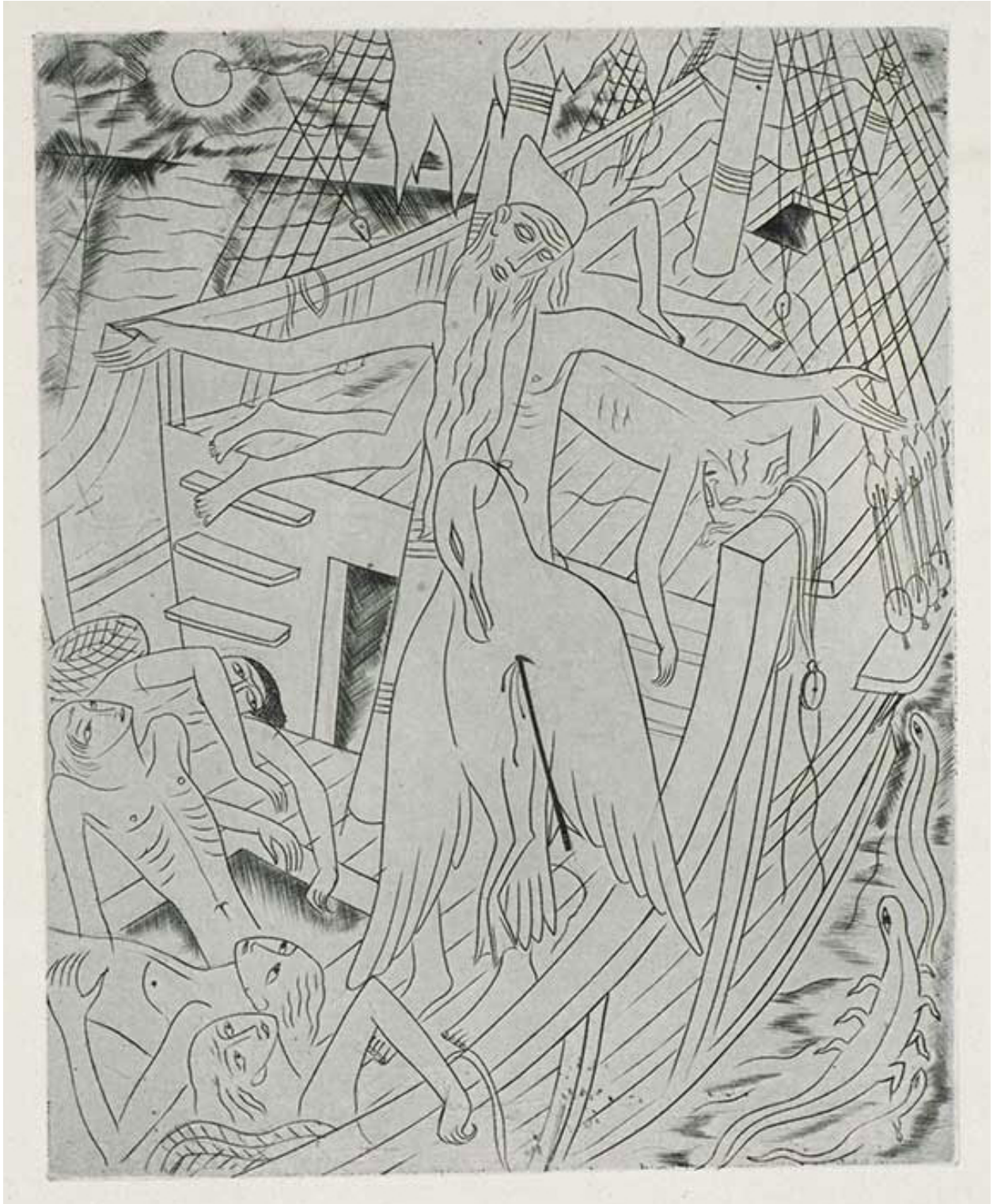
Apparently tidy, but in fact ambiguous. Does loving man and bird and beast, which is to say, fulfilling the second of the two greatest commandments, offer evidence that one also fulfills the first, that is, loves God? Or does loving man and bird and beast itself constitute the only prayer needed, such that the first commandment can be discarded? The one alternative is easily reconciled with theological orthodoxy, while the other tends towards pantheism. To see the pantheistic side of Coleridge's legacy, consider a poem like W. B. Yeats' "Dialogue of Self and Soul," which echoes the Mariner in its ending lines, and seems almost to propose a reading of the earlier poem<sup>14</sup>:

When such as I cast out remorse  
So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
We must laugh and we must sing,  
We are blest by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest.

It's worth pausing to unpack the poetic theology implicit here. The singularity of the "I" confers on all those "such as" him the right to cast out remorse, at which point sweetness flows into "the" breast—the breast of all such as him; but also, the breast of the new body that the "I" has brought into being by proposing itself as an exemplar. The superfluity of this body

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<sup>14</sup> Yeats, *Collected Works* I:236.



*Illustration 5: David Jones, Plate 5 of The Ancient Mariner, 1931, copperplate, 17.5 by 13.5 cm. In Jones, The Ancient Mariner, 63. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, reproduced with permission.*

emanates into a “We” who laughs and sings, and blessing descends, not upon any particular thing, nor even upon “all living things” (a phrase Yeats used in his drafts, only to discard<sup>15</sup>), but upon “everything we look upon.” The latter phrase strongly suggests that the blessing finds its source in the looking, not in the things. “We” do not recognize here any fact about the world, but rather change the world by changing ourselves.

Jones probably sensed the possibility of re-envisioning Coleridge’s poem in the Yeatsian way, such that the water snakes would matter only accidentally, as an occasion for the blessing, playing a role which could have been filled by anything or everything else. His illustrations, however, took a different path. The water snakes appear in Plate 5, but also in Plate 3, depicting the moment when, as Coleridge’s marginal gloss puts it, “the Albatross begins to be avenged” (52). The textual basis for this inclusion is slight but significant. Among a catalog of woes (no wind, no fresh water, St. Elmo’s fire, prophetic nightmares) Coleridge mentions that “slimy things did crawl with legs | Upon the slimy sea” (53). Jones takes these slimy things and the water snakes to be one and the same, and places them prominently in two of his eight illustrations. Seeing the snakes as emblems of the Mariner’s exclusion from blessedness, Jones cannot take the Mariner’s act of recognizing and blessing their beauty to be a casting out of some generalized feeling of remorse. What the Mariner has overcome is his resentment towards the punishment he suffers; he has reached, not the end of remorse, but its beginning.

Jones emphasizes this acceptance of punishment also through his decision to center Plate 5 not on the Mariner’s line of sight, but on his cruciform body, arms extended and torso seamlessly aligned with the ship’s central mast. It’s important (not to say crucial) to recognize

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<sup>15</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 314.

that the Mariner's posture does not make him a "Christ figure," whatever that would mean.<sup>16</sup>

The only innocent victim here is the albatross itself, hung crucified upon the body of the Mariner, as it had been crucified against the masthead in Plate 2 (the albatross seems for Jones to be something like the Lamb of God). The Mariner's posture does, however, make him a spiritual representative of the dead sailors whose arms and legs are arrayed behind him like extensions of his flesh. Whatever he does will be done on their behalf. He has not yet done it; the albatross still hangs around his neck. Jones depicts instead the moment immediately preceding his blessing of the water-snakes, the moment Coleridge describes in the stanza quoted above, immediately preceding the blessing. By lingering in this moment of indeterminate perception, Jones emphasizes both that the Mariner's blessing was a free choice, a recognition unforced and deliberate, and that it was precipitated by something outside the Mariner's control, namely, by the water-snakes themselves, whose appearance we could liken, to use the theological vocabulary Jones favored, to the advent of prevenient grace.

So Thomas Berenato is only half-correct when he describes Jones's reading of the *Ancient Mariner* like this: "Forgiveness arrives abruptly for the Mariner, not as an ethical act but as a state of being or a state of the world—a state of being in the world—on the same order as but of another category than the ethical."<sup>17</sup> Far from "abrupt," the Mariner's recognition of the water snakes' beauty takes place gradually, as he absorbs their significance, only after which he can bless them. Berenato is right, though, to emphasize that "the ethical" is not quite what

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<sup>16</sup> Belinda Humfrey, assuming that Jones does mean to equate the Mariner with Christ, takes Jones to task for what she rightly suggests is "either oversimplification or unreasonable confusion or both" (Humfrey, "David Jones and the Ancient Mariner," 126.). She is right that such an equation would be these things—Jones, however, does not make it.

<sup>17</sup> Berenato, "David Jones and the Ancient Mariner," 141.



Jones is concerned with. In his 1964 introduction to the poem (the chief focus of Berenato's essay), Jones expressed objections to the poem's ethical and theological vocabulary, and particularly to Coleridge's misuse of the word 'penance' for the Mariner's fate: "it is no part of the job of those who administer this sacrament to impose compulsion-neuroses under the guise of penances."<sup>18</sup> Rather than absolve the Mariner of his sins, Jones suggests, the endless retelling of his story is like an ordeal imposed by the gods, fate, or psychological necessity. We might even suspect that, for Jones, the necessity in play here is the necessity that arises from freedom, somewhat like the "must" in Yeats's line "We must laugh and we must sing"—only the remorseful Mariner knows that there is more to life than laughter and song. When Jones's Mariner sees the rectitude of his punishment, his act of vision does not forgive him his sins (we cannot redeem ourselves), but it makes him capable of recognizing what has happened to him, and so of telling his story.<sup>19</sup> His plight, for Jones, is quintessentially artistic, and quintessentially human.

We can recognize a similar turn toward the humanizing power of free remorse in Auden's treatment of Joseph in "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio." Written over two years from 1941 to 1943, this work has much in common with "Musée de Beaux Arts," written three years earlier: both are about Christmas, the slaughter of innocents, the difficult necessity of putting one's trust in a moral authority. "For the Time Being," though, is no lyric poem, but

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<sup>18</sup> Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> A rival interpretation of Jones's interpretation of Coleridge is worth noting: for Peter Larkin, Jones's essay help us to see that "Only in aspiring toward the liturgical can the Mariner rediscover his own lostness, and from within a repetition echoing divine distinction and difference cease to centre that loss obsessively on his own self-narration." Larkin, "Repetition, Difference, and Liturgical Participation in Coleridge's 'the Ancient Mariner'," 157. I take Jones not to be quite so pessimistic about the fate of poetry.

rather an almost *sui generis* entity, a closet oratorio. It lacks music, for Benjamin Britten, who initially agreed to the collaboration, and with whom Auden had worked before, grew frustrated with Auden's approach and never worked with him again, leaving "For the Time Being" "an oratory in name only."<sup>20</sup> Yet despite this absence, the "Oratorio" subtitle is significant for the contrast it draws with Auden's 1932 experimental collage *The Orators: An English Study*. The title of that work summarizes its devastating cultural critique: everything in England had become oratorical, rhetorical, theatrical, a matter of incoherent voices defined only by their power relations with other voices. A decade later, Auden's new title suggests that poetic activity can escape political rhetoric into something closer to prayerful music—music, especially that of Mozart, being something Auden associated with true moral freedom.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jacobs, "Introduction" xxxvii.

<sup>21</sup> Auden elaborated on Mozart's moral freedom, and superiority to Wagner, in his 1941 essay "Mimesis and Allegory." For Mozart, freedom does not mean freedom from judgment but rather freedom to perform significant actions within a shared human world. Mozart's greatness comes from his presentation of this shared world: we see not only characters willing, but characters seeing their lives and willing what they see. Wagner's world, in contrast, is entirely private, and the wills both of his characters and of his works themselves seem unrelated to their or our knowledge. Auden asks rhetorically, "In what respects, then, can Wagner's work be called good or bad?" (Auden, *Prose* II:84). In an important sense, it cannot be called either, and this very fact shows it to be in another sense deeply corrupt. This sense is not so much moral as pre-moral, as it is a condition of possibility for moral judgment that one be able to ascribe to actions a meaning beyond the private intentions of the actor.

Auden's later attitude toward music emphasized not its publicity but rather its irresponsibility. Both music and painting, he wrote, "have only the present indicative tense and no negative. For this reason, it makes no sense to ask of a piece of music or a painting: does the composer or the painter mean what he says, or is he just pretending? Lying or self-deception can be expressed by neither" (ibid. V:292). As with much of Auden's later criticism, such claims as these reify into an assurance of innocence what had to the earlier Auden seemed rather an occasional intimation of freedom; on this topic see McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, especially Chapter 4. See also Jacobs, "Auden and the Dream of Public Poetry" for an exploration of Auden's use of popular music as a response to problems of theatricality.

Important, too, is the titular “Christmas,” which also revisits an earlier work of Auden’s, this time his aforementioned play *Paid on Both Sides*. That play—and we should notice the similarity between the rhythm of its title and that of “For the Time Being”—appropriated Father Xmas as an element in a mythic pastiche: first Father Xmas presides over a surreal trial in which the jurors wear school caps and the warder wields a baby bottle, then he guides in a Doctor and Photographer to extract a tooth from the executed corpse. The allegory has vague resonances with the Christmas story, pointing vaguely to the rebirth of the new year freed from the tyranny of the old, but *Paid on Both Sides* has no interest in preserving that story’s integrity. The Christmas oratorio of fourteen years later, in contrast, endeavors to illustrate the Nativity story very much as the Gospels tell it, stringing together ten set-pieces depicting various biblical episodes, each one halfway between a lyric sequence and a closet drama sans stage directions. Intriguingly, “For the Time Being” omits the Christ-child himself, who receives not a single line, focusing instead on how the Christian, and particularly the Christian artist, can and should respond to his advent.

Mozart and Christianity were two of what Nicholas Jenkins calls Auden’s “three fixed reference points [...] three kinds of ‘conversion’” discovered around 1940.<sup>22</sup> The third was Chester Kallman, with whom Auden fell deeply in love in 1939, and “L’affaire C,” as Auden later called it, would also be deeply relevant to the composition of “For the Time Being,” particularly for the character of Joseph. Auden discovered Kallman’s unfaithfulness near the beginning of the Oratorio’s composition. In a Christmas 1941 letter to Kallman, written while writing the scenario for the annunciation to St. Joseph, or as Auden titles it, that saint’s

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<sup>22</sup> Jenkins, “Auden in America,” 47.

temptation, Auden compared Kallman to the Virgin Mary and himself to the apparently cuckolded husband who must overcome feelings of masculine jealousy.<sup>23</sup> Remarkably, Auden glosses over the fact that Mary only appeared to have betrayed Joseph, whereas Kallman had explicitly declared his refusal to be monogamous. Auden seems fairly soon afterward to have concluded that this way of looking at the situation was a mistake,<sup>24</sup> and I think it would be misguided to read the Oratorio as straight autobiography. Joseph tells us less about Auden's relationship with Kallman than about Auden's status as a love poet who worries about the possibility of fidelity.

Seeing Joseph as an artist becomes especially plausible when we remember that the biblical Joseph was a carpenter. Auden's Joseph is an artist confronted with a fecundity for which he can neither take credit nor given an account. In this, I argue, he closely resembles Jones's ancient Mariner. As Auden tells it, Joseph runs down the street to meet "My own true Love" when he is abruptly informed by a mocking chorus of Mary's pregnancy.<sup>25</sup> The revelation prompts him to doubtful prayer:

JOSEPH  
All I ask is one  
Important and elegant proof  
That what my Love had done  
Was really at your will  
And that your will is Love.

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<sup>23</sup> Letter to Chester Kallman, Christmas Day, 1941, reprinted in Farnan, *Auden in Love*, 65–66.

<sup>24</sup> According to Mendelson, "By the time Auden finished the oratorio, in July 1942, he still considered himself bound to Kallman by vows, but he was beginning to think of the emotional link between them less as a marriage than as a relation of parent and child." Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 515.

<sup>25</sup> Auden, *For the Time Being*, 19. Citations henceforth parenthetical by page number.

GABRIEL

No, you must believe;

Be silent and be still.

(21)

It is usual, and for good reason, to take this exchange as instantiating of one of Auden's favorite theological concepts, the Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Doing so misleads us, however, if we take it to mean that Joseph's request is, while faithless, reasonable. Though his request sounds reasonable, it is even less so than that of Othello which it faintly echoes. We at least have some idea of what might furnish "the ocular proof" of infidelity (though we might doubt that a fallen handkerchief counts as such). But what would the "important and elegant proof" Joseph asks for look like? His question does concern a particular person, Mary, and so is not a question of Yeatsian world-perception, but it does not concern any particular fact about her. Joseph is not even asking the angel to prove a negative, for his concern is not the fact of infidelity but rather Mary's motivation, and whether or not it stems ultimately from divine love. Like the happiness of the water snakes, the purity of Mary's motives cannot be observed, it can only be acknowledged, or not.

Acknowledgement happens, not through argument, but through silence and stillness. By definition, we do not hear Joseph reduced to this silence, a silence he will hold until the very end of the poem. We are given only his deliberations in the moments before he takes it on. In place of any prayer of assent, we hear the narrator elaborating on the reasons that silence is necessary: "You must atone, | Joseph, in silence and alone" (21), for the myriad sins of the male sex, from Adam's shifting the blame to Eve, to Joseph's own temptation toward possessive jealousy. That the silent affirmation to which he is called atones for the very denial that

preceded it again suggests a parallel with the Mariner's unaware blessing of the water snakes, which undid the curse accompanying the sailors' cursing of the slimy things. Like that of the Mariner, Joseph's deserved but freely chosen suffering has no end point, as the Narrator informs him:

To choose what is difficult all one's days  
As if it were easy, that is faith. Joseph, praise.  
(23)

This ordeal (to borrow Jones's word) makes the mature Joseph into what he is: in moving, through deliberation, from resentment to praise, Joseph becomes, like the Mariner, a kind of artist, albeit, in a paradoxical image, an artist of silence.

Auden's Joseph resembles Jones's Mariner, finally, in the deflationary account his author gave for what artistic praise accomplishes. For Jones, though his Mariner suffered a self-crucifixion, his ordeal was more psychological than theological. For Auden, Joseph's decision to praise makes a difference only to himself, not to the world: "Sin fractures the vision, not the fact" (23). Far from perception creating reality, fact is what remains when vision is sinfully lost. Conversely, acknowledgment of reality, of Mary's love, restores vision. Joseph's silence enables a chorus to importune his prayers,

That common ungifted  
Natures may  
Believe that their normal  
Vision can  
Walk to perfection.  
(26)

"Guilt," "prayer," "love," "vision": Auden's vocabulary is not too different from Yeats's, and precisely the same as that of Coleridge. But the words used matter less than the specific

grammar each poet establishes for them. In Yeats, the “I” served as the source of an emanation of blessing by casting out remorse. In Auden, Joseph accepts guilt in order to become, not a source of grace, but only a proof of possibility, making space for a certain belief regarding how vision works. The statement of that belief, with its enjambment of “normal | Vision,” emphasizes how vision has been brought down to earth. It is no longer a question of the visionary poet blessing the cosmos with his flashing eyes, but one of various human beings trying to recognize one another with eyes of love because they see that such love is possible.

## 2. Symmetries of Form and Asymmetries of Vision

These works’ deflation of poetic vision goes hand in hand with their reconsideration of poetic time. The titles of both *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and “For the Time Being” suggest a concern with temporality. We have already seen that concern manifest itself in two distinct ways, both related to the extension in time of the act of recognition: first, we saw both the Ancient Mariner and St. Joseph linger in the moment before accepting praise; second, we heard how each of them will spend the rest of his long life in the difficult work of praise. That these two moments in the life of the visionary take place within time is important for understanding either of them. It is also, and more interestingly, important for understanding the relationship between them. The moment of praise not only differs from that of resentment, but follows and responds to it, in a way which prohibits their being understood as interchangeable alternatives. Recognition can be recognized only in its emergence from a failure of recognition, such that the asymmetry between them resembles the asymmetry between present and past. I take this asymmetry to be a central theme of both of the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations and the

Christmas oratorio.

The difference between present and past cannot be captured—indeed, is intentionally obliterated—by the instantaneous meaningfulness of hieroglyph, gestus, or scream. Accordingly, we cannot epitomize Jones's *Ancient Mariner* illustrations with the image of the cruciform Mariner, and neither can we epitomize Auden's Christmas oratorio with the voice of doubting Joseph. Both works concern themselves, not with a single moment of meaning, but with how meaning arises from the interrelations of disparate moments. This concern can be understood only through considering these works' temporal extension. These works highlight the thematic importance of time, of the relationship between one moment and the next, through their peculiar symmetrical structures. Peculiar, and peculiarly similar; as we can see in the following tables, each of these works consists of ten scenes, arranged to emphasize their division into five formally and thematically paired diptychs. I suggest that these symmetrical diptychs aim to accomplish what a unified tableau of ideal meaning cannot, namely, suggest the inevitably asymmetrical character of recognition, the fact that it divides experience into *before* and *after*.

Now, it might seem that more parsimonious explanations are available for these structures, and taken individually this objection might be persuasive. It is undoubtedly true, after all, that both Jones and Auden appreciated formal patterns for their own sake, and it may be that they arrived at these pairings from a love of symmetry. Alternatively, it is undoubtedly true that both Jones and Auden enjoyed conceptual maps and taxonomies, and it might be that these diptychs are attempts at conceptual analysis, a poor poet's substitute for rational discourse. I do not deny either suggestion, but I doubt that either can constitute a sufficient



explanation for the phenomenon in question, the *similarity* between these distinct works' symmetrical forms. Neither of the accounts just mentioned implies a relationship between these works' particular poetic concerns and the particular forms into which they settled, and therefore, as far as these explanations are concerned, it is sheer coincidence that these works resemble one another in both structure and theme. I proceed on the hypothesis that there is, in fact, something to explain.

Consider first the scene pairings in Jones's *Ancient Mariner* illustrations. The pairings given in the second column are not labeled in the original text, but will, I believe, be uncontroversial:

PLATE	PAIRING	LINE ILLUSTRATED <sup>a</sup>
Front	A	(The Harbor)
1	B	"He stoppeth one of three" (49)
2	C	"I shot the albatross" (51)
3	D	"Slimy things did crawl with legs" (53)
4	E	"The twain were casting dice" (55)
5	E	"I watched the water-snakes" (57)
6	D	"They raised their limbs like lifeless tools" (59)
7	C	"Is this the hill? is this the kirk?" (63)
8	B	"The little vesper-bell" (67)
Tail	A	(The Pelican)

*Table 1: Structure of Ancient Mariner illustrations*

<sup>a</sup> Since Jones did not title the individual plates, I have selected the lines from Coleridge's poem that they seem to illustrate. The frontispiece and tailpiece relate thematically to the poem but do not illustrate any particular scene.

Jones builds each panel of the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations around a handful of recurring motifs: canted horizon line, Mariner, sea, ship, albatross, sea-snakes, bride, church door. These serve not only to tell the story of Coleridge's poem—the Mariner shoots the albatross and the rest of the crew falls dead, he himself is trapped by Life-in-Death until he blesses the water-

snakes, spirits reanimate the crew and bring the Mariner safely into harbor, all this being the story the Mariner tells the Wedding Guest on the steps outside the church—but also to direct our attention to the connections between scenes and to the unity of the series as a whole.

Abstract visual form suffices to establish these links, which occur in concentric pairs, first and last, second and second-to-last, and so on, comprising a structure Thomas Dilworth compares to Homeric ring-composition.<sup>26</sup>

As one might expect, the differences between the paired scenes matter as much as the similarities. Plate 1 illustrates the opening lines of the poem, where the Ancient Mariner accosts the Wedding Guest as he follows the Bride into a seaside neoclassical church; in Plate 8, Jones's take on the call to prayer that rings out as the Mariner's tale ends, we see a similar line of figures turning the corner of a Romanesque chapel. The latter image, however, pictures not rupture, but harmony, with the lonely guests giving way to a family group, and the group moving, not away from the Mariner, but toward a priest incensing the altar. The remaining plates follow the Mariner's narrated journey. Plate 2 shows the albatross pierced by the crossbow bolt as if nailed to the cross-like mast; Plate 7, depicting the Mariner seeing the corpses fall back down as the ship enters the bay, has him stretched on the rigging at the same angle as the albatross. Plate 3 shows the ship becalmed at sunset, water snakes in the water nearby, the crew gathered on deck and lifting up their arms in despair; in Plate 6 the ship is moved by benevolent spirits inhabiting the bodies of the dead sailors. The two plates at the

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<sup>26</sup> Afterword to Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 95. Dilworth makes similar claims about most of Jones's poetic works, see his *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*. I find this emphasis on circularity to be a misreading of the title of *In Parenthesis*, and offer an alternative account in Chapter Five.

heart of the series each make of the deck a kind of stage, framing a limited number of bodies in dramatic relation to one another: in Plate 4, Death and Life-in-Death play their frenzied game of dice, on which the Mariner's life hangs; in Plate 5, the Mariner, standing as if crucified, looks out at the water-snakes. Even the angles of ship and horizon line are the same—but one conveys a look of curse, the other a look of blessing.

Now, the summary of the *Ancient Mariner* ring structure just given relies heavily on Dilworth's analysis. I am not entirely convinced, however, by Dilworth's account of the structure's significance. Dilworth argues that Jones merely draws out what is latent in the *Ancient Mariner* itself, even suggesting that Jones discovered the principles of ring-composition by reading Coleridge, and thus that Jones's imagination is Coleridgean just to the extent that it imagines rings. This argument is implausible for two reasons. First, Coleridge's poem is not a ring composition in any strong sense, and certainly does not have a "quasi-symmetrical and concentric" structure running throughout, as Dilworth suggests.<sup>27</sup> The only true symmetries occur at the very beginning and the very end, and add up to merely this: the Mariner tells a story about a voyage; when the narrated voyage ends, the Mariner ends his story. Second, Jones's symmetries do not (because they could not) derive from Coleridge's poem. Rather, they depend on departures from it. The fourth and fifth prints, for example, give the impression,

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<sup>27</sup> Afterword to Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 112. Dilworth's claims rest on seven image-pairs which he claims lie in rings around the blessing of the water-snakes. The apparent symmetry and concentricity, however, are entirely illusory. The illusion of symmetry vanishes when we arrange the pairings by line number of their first member, and see that the line numbers of their second members form a sequence—501, 464, 327, 595, 365, 313, 530—indistinguishable from one randomly generated. The illusion of concentricity vanishes when we see that it is present only by stipulation: Dilworth did not even look for image-pairs for which both members are in the same half of the poem, and so of course each pair he found spanned the poem's center.

false so far as the poem is concerned, that Death and Life-in-Death stand on the Mariner's own ship rather than on a separate ghostly craft. To understand these symmetries we must look beyond Coleridge's poem and see what Jones is trying to do with it.

Before doing so, however, I would like to compare the concentric arrangement for Jones's prints with the scene pairings in Auden's "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio." Rather than the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations' concentric rings, the oratorio offers its pairings as a bracketed crescendo:

SCENE <sup>a</sup>	PAIRING	SCENE TITLE
1	A	"Advent"
2	B	"The Annunciation"
3	B	"The Temptation of St. Joseph"
4.I <sup>b</sup>	C	"The Summons"
4.II-V	D	(Proclamation of the Census)
5	C	"The Vision of the Shepherds"
6	D	"At the Manger"
7	E	"The Meditation of Simeon"
8	E	"The Massacre of the Innocents"
9	A	"The Flight into Egypt"

*Table 2: Structure of For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*

<sup>a</sup> Scenes, unnumbered in the text, have been numerically labeled for ease of reference.

<sup>b</sup> I separate Part I of "The Summons" from Parts II-V on these grounds: 4.I, in which the Magi tell of seeing the star, contrasts with the song of the Shepherds in 5, but 4.II-V, which depict the radio broadcast proclaiming the census, contrasts with the manger scene in 6. I also recognize, however, that Auden knew what he was doing when he placed the Magi and the Proclamation together. Scenes 4, 5, and 6 make up a single complex unit, consisting of multiple interlocking oppositions.

In the opening "Advent" the Narrator and Chorus do not really introduce the narrative but rather consider the spiritual state of those who await the miracle. We then hear a pair of angelic messages: "The Annunciation," initiated by a psychological quartet of thought, sensation, feeling, and intuition, and "The Temptation of St. Joseph," where the chorus plays the role of

external social pressure. Scenes 4 and 5 contrast the humorously erudite wise men's response to "The Summons" with "The Vision of the Shepherds" of a heavenly choir. Interpolated between them is the proclamation of the census, in the style of a radio address, with accompanying ode to Caesar's greatness in establishing the imperium; following them, and poised against the proclamation, is the sixth scene, "At the Manger," where wise men and shepherds "for Love unite our various song" (44). The final, most dramatic opposition pits "The Meditation of Simeon," punctuated with choral motets, against Herod's speech in "The Massacre of the Innocents," whose consequences we see in the soldiers' bawdy song and Rachel's lament for her lost children. With "The Flight into Egypt" of Joseph and Mary the oratorio ends much as it began, the narrator and chorus interpreting for us not the story so much as the fact that we have heard it and now must move on with our lives, as too must Joseph and Mary themselves.

These symmetries are unmistakable, and perhaps even excessively obtrusive. I suspect Auden's rigid adherence to them is responsible for what many critics have judged to be the oratorio's weaknesses—Edward Mendelson, for example, calls it "a mixed success, with long-winded and dutiful-sounding passages scattered among memorably vivid ones."<sup>28</sup> Notably, the weakest scenes are those with the most traditional subject matter, such as the Annunciation and the gathering of guests to see the Christ-Child. It is as if Auden could make these scenes his own only by scaffolding them around his own pseudophilosophical analyses: the psychodrama of "The Annunciation" being, as Auden later put it, "Bosh, straight from Jung,"<sup>29</sup> while "At the Manger" presents the homebrewed sociopsychological dichotomy Auden soon named

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<sup>28</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 503.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

Arcadian–Utopian (better known from his 1955 poem “Vespers”). The oratorio’s better moments come when the scenes paired are dramatically asymmetrical, offering not taxonomies of abstract classes of people (wise men, shepherds) but rather responses to the Christ event made by specific persons—Joseph’s temptation, Simeon’s meditation, Herod’s oration—and our imagined responses to them, especially as seen at the oratorio’s opening and close.

It is on the two asymmetrical pairs of scenes just mentioned—Advent and Egypt, Simeon and Herod—which I focus in the next section, placing them alongside the central and outermost pairs of full-page *Ancient Mariner* illustrations. I take these to be the key scenes of these two works, as well as the scenes which best illuminate the resemblance I seek to specify between them. In each of these works two scenes stand outside the narrated story which all of the other pairs tell; as if mediating between the story and its audience, these scenes comment on our perception and reception of it. Meanwhile, within each of the stories, the sequence of contrasting pairs amplifies our perception of a single crucial opposition, one concerned also with contrasting ways of seeing. The following chart summarizes the comparisons I would make:

WAY OF SEEING	<i>ANCIENT MARINER</i>	<i>FOR THE TIME BEING</i>
A Recurrent vision...	1: “He stoppeth one of three”	9: “The Flight into Egypt”
B ...of seeing oneself	4: “The twain were casting dice”	8: “The Massacre of the Innocents”
B ...of seeing others	5: “I watched the water-snakes”	7: “The Meditation of Simeon”
A Immediate vision...	8: “The little vesper bell”	1: “Advent”

*Table 3: Parallels Between The Ancient Mariner and For the Time Being*

What is remarkable about the outer pair of each work is not the presence of a narrative frame, but how the frame, far from offering a formal unity, divides against itself. Each work offers at beginning and end two incompatible world-determining acts of theatrical perception: one may

see in a single unitary moment, or one may see piecemeal, gradually, and recurrently. What is remarkable about the innermost pair is that the contrast it draws cannot be reduced to that of the first. We see here the deliberate leap from meaninglessness to meaning, from curse to blessing, as a leap from seeing only oneself to seeing oneself in relation to others, which means also to seeing that knowledge of this difference cannot be taken for granted. Both works associate this leap, not with the unitary vision of accomplished religious ritual, but with the never-completed ordeal of dramatic recognition.

### 3. Curse and Blessing, Secular and Sacred

Let us look, first, at the central plates of the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations, with which we already have some familiarity. Plate 5, discussed above, finds its match in Plate 4, Jones's hellish vision of Death dicing with Life-in-Death. In Coleridge's poem, these two figures herald from afar the death of all the crew save the Mariner, who lives on as if dead. In Jones's engraving, however, their dicing reads like a hollowing out of the Mariner's deliberate watching of the water-snakes. As Dilworth shows,<sup>30</sup> many subtle visual cues make the two figures in Plate 4 seem somehow the same as those in Plate 5, like two aspects of a duck-rabbit. The tilted horizon line, the mast, the shrouds, all reappear, but now the sun is clouded and the ship skeletal. The Mariner's feet become Death's right foot and Life-in-Death's left; the staircase beside the Mariner, Death's backbone; the plumage of the albatross, Life-in-Death's dress; the puncture wound left by the crossbow, the beauty mark on her bare thigh; the Mariner's open arms, a grotesque embrace of interlocking limbs. That embrace centers on floating dice

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<sup>30</sup> Afterword to Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 102–6.

suggestive of the meaninglessness of aleatoric rule, a suggestion emphasized by the nonsensical numbering of the game board. If the attitude of these players is less restrained and more frenetic than in *Soldiers Dicing*, it may have something to do with how Plate 5 places the crucifix center-stage rather than, as the sketch had done, turning away from it. Rather than the self-stultifying isolation of *Soldiers Dicing*, here the open center of Mariner and albatross finds its antithesis in the self-entrancement of skeleton and harlot.



*Illustration 6: David Jones, Plates 4 and 5 of The Ancient Mariner, 1931, copperplate, 17.5 by 13.5 cm ea. In Jones, The Ancient Mariner, 59 and 63. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, reproduced with permission.*

Only to note these plates' antithetical visions, however, will not suffice. To stop here would suggest that they relate like two sides of a coin, each equally compelling but impossible to hold in view simultaneously. This suggestion fails when we consider how both plates are



*about* both an act of perception and a dyadic relation, such that each plate offers a distinctive way of seeing its relationship to the other. Plate 4 takes its inspiration from the Mariner's query, "Is Death that woman's mate?" Their hellish embrace might suggest that Jones answers in the affirmative, but their eyes tell a different story, pointing not at each other but at the tumbling dice between them. Death's empty eye sockets see nothing, while the eyes of Life-in-Death see only the playing out of her own empty activity, the tumbling of the dice from the cup she herself holds. If we adopt Life-in-Death's way of seeing, we will be left incapable of placing the two in relation to one another, and indeed will be incapable of seeing that there are two separate beings in the first place which might be able to stand in relation. In Plate 5, in contrast, the albatross hangs dead from the Mariner's neck, and looks with dead eyes out at the water-snakes the Mariner sees with the eyes of the half-living. His act of seeing has the potential to loosen the cursed string binding albatross and Mariner together, but the blessing has not yet taken place. The Mariner stands transfixed in the moment of deliberation, when both the way of curse and the way of blessing lie open to him. If we see as the Mariner sees, we will be capable of deliberating between Plate 4 and Plate 5.

One can, of course, adopt a skeptical attitude towards such distinctions, but unless one refuses to recognize alternate attitudes, the resulting position will be incoherent. The initially plausible view that Plate 4 and Plate 5 offer us no way to decide between them necessitates the much less plausible view that their differences from one another do not exist. At least, I take such a denial to be implausible in this case because I cannot envision maintaining it and have yet to encounter a cogent argument for it. Even Dilworth, who places far too much emphasis on the notion of symmetry, describes the one print not simply as the other's double, but as a

“ghostly presence [...] carried over [...] like a visual after-image.”<sup>31</sup> Still, the implausibility does not reside in the lines on the page, nor in the figures we take them to represent, nor even in the narrative in which we understand those figures to be embedded, but rather in our all-things-considered interpretive judgments. What will happen when, in otherwise similar circumstances, such a judgment does not seem so obvious?

We find ourselves in this situation with Simeon’s musing and Herod’s ranting in “For the Time Being.” I have suggested that these stand to one another as the Mariner’s vision stands to that of Life-in-Death. But there is considerably more slippage between them—indeed, as Edward Mendelson discovered, much of what is now Herod’s speech Auden originally intended for Simeon’s<sup>32</sup>—and critical judgment is accordingly divided. While most see Simeon’s meditation as directly reporting Auden’s theological beliefs, a minority think the speech ironic. Robert Caserio, for one, writes that “this tour de force theodicy [...] is undercut by its pedantic, assured assertiveness [...] Simeon, I submit, is Herod doubled as a theologian [...] In Simeon logical demonstration slaughters belief.”<sup>33</sup> How to adjudicate this disagreement?

We ought first to recognize that Caserio is surely correct to shift our focus away from the intellectual content of Simeon and Herod’s speeches and toward their status as dramatic representations. Though Simeon does elaborate the quasi-Kierkegaardian kairotic theology Auden’s prose often endorsed, and Herod does expound the liberal individualism Auden’s prose often criticized, these correspondences cannot settle the aesthetic question. The possibility remains that, despite Auden’s basic agreement with Simeon’s argument, he chose to vitiate

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>32</sup> Mendelson, “Revision and Power,” 107.

<sup>33</sup> Caserio, “Auden’s New Citizenship,” 102.

Simeon's utterance through some form of dramatic irony, such that it finally and decisively fails to mean what it says. But it seems *prima facie* unlikely that Auden would so subvert the Gospel narrative as to make Simeon Herod's partner in hypocrisy, given that Herod is on the brink of ordering the massacre of the innocents and Simeon has just fulfilled his life's work of awaiting the coming of the Christ and now prepares for a holy death. At the very least, it will require something more than Caserio's vague appeal to tone of voice to prove that it is so. We will have to look at what Simeon and Herod's speeches *do*, in the context of the other voices in their section of the oratorio.

In both scenes the principal character speaks in prose, while other figures utter lyrics. The scenes differ greatly, however, in how the two are combined. Simeon's scene achieves a formal unity through the dialogue between him and the chorus, who respond antiphonally to each stage of his prose argument with gnomic one-line verses. The opening section gives the character of the thing:

SIMEON

As long as the apple had not been entirely digested, as long as there remained the least understanding between Adam and the stars, rivers and horses with whom he had once known complete intimacy, as long as Eve could share in any way with the moods of the rose or the ambitions of the swallow, there was still a hope that the effects of the poison would wear off, that the exile from Paradise was only a bad dream, that the Fall had not occurred in fact.

CHORUS

*When we woke it was day; we went on weeping.*

SIMEON

As long as there were any roads to amnesia [...]

(47)

In thirteen such discourses, really one long discourse broken into thirteen sections, Simeon develops a theory of world history culminating in the birth of Christ. The chorus's thirteen

italicized motets punctuate that discourse and turn it from speculation into benediction.

Herod's speech, in contrast, is an unbroken block of prose, not meditatively discursive like Simeon's, but instead desperately rhetorical. It begins (after a formal acknowledgment of "those through whom my nature is by necessity what it is" (53)) in confident argument:

There is no visible disorder. No crime—what could be more innocent than the birth of an artisan's child? To-day has been one of those perfect winter days, cold, brilliant, and utterly still, when the bark of the shepherd's dog carries for miles, and the great wild mountains come up quite close to the city walls, and the mind feels intensely awake, and this evening as I stand at this window high up in the citadel there is nothing in the whole magnificent panorama of plain and mountains to indicate that the Empire is threatened by a danger more dreadful than any invasion of Tartars on racing camels or conspiracy of the Praetorian Guard. (54)

By the speech's end, however, it has descended into desperate invective:

And for me personally at this moment it would mean that God had given me the power to destroy Himself. I refuse to be taken in. He could not play such a horrible practical joke. Why should He dislike me so? I've worked like a slave. Ask anyone you like. I read all official dispatches without skipping. I've taken elocution lessons. I've hardly ever taken bribes. How dare He allow me to decide? I've tried to be good. I brush my teeth every night. I haven't had sex for a month. I object. I'm a liberal. I want everyone to be happy. I wish I had never been born. (58)

This speech, which would take upwards of ten minutes to recite, is succeeded by the song of the soldiers, who take up where Herod left off, with sex, birth, and violence:

When the Sex War ended with the slaughter of the Grandmothers  
They found a bachelor's boy suffocating under them;  
Somebody called him George and that was the end of it:  
They hitched him up to the Army.  
*George, you old debutante,*  
*How did you get in the Army?*  
(58)

In the third section of "The Massacre of the Innocents" Auden's Rachel speaks in long endstopped lines reminiscent of Whitman or, more relevantly, the Psalms:

Tomorrow, perhaps, he will come to himself in Heaven.  
But here Grief turns her silence, neither in this direction, nor in that, nor for any reason.  
And her coldness now is on the earth forever.

(60)

Auden draws the idea for Rachel's lament from the Gospel's conclusion to the Innocents episode: "Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."<sup>34</sup>

I would suggest that the logic governing the relation between Herod, Soldiers, and Rachel is tragic, in that the sequel to Herod's speech reveals an intention he cannot openly acknowledge. Consider, first, what Herod hopes to prevent: unless he takes action, he alleges, "Instead of Rational Law, objective truths perceptible to any who will undergo the necessary intellectual discipline, Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions" (56-57). The soldier's camp narrative suggests that this illusion of rational unanimity rests on an entirely corporeal mode of discipline: "But whoops, here comes His Idleness, buttoning his uniform; | Just in tidy time to massacre the Innocents" (59). While Herod claims to stand for the objective against the subjective, in fact he stands for one particular subjectivity at the expense of all others. Consider, second, the irony lurking in Herod's final words: "I want everyone to be happy. I wish I had never been born" (58). Herod follows these words, not with the suicide they would result in if they meant seriously, but with a genocide whose fruits are audible in Rachel's lament. This is not an instance of the repressed returning (Herod knows quite well what he is doing), but rather of a bad-faith categorical imperative. If life is not worth living, it is not

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<sup>34</sup> Matt 2:17-18.

enough to end one's own life, one must also end the lives of everyone about to enter a world where they will be condemned to unhappiness (or, rather, where they are not guaranteed happiness, which for Herod, who cannot be happy unless everyone is happy, comes to the same thing). In wishing he had never been born, Herod tries to see the massacre of the innocents not as a dragnet targeting the Christ-child, but as an act of mass suicide. But Herod does not really mean what he says; he exempts himself from this suicide, just as he fails to classify his own perspective under the heading of subjective visions. Rachel is left to express the resulting incoherence, the absence of "any reason."

If Herod's speech lies as far from his action as does the hand of Life-in-Death from her tumbling dice, Simeon's word and the Chorus's deed work in tandem, like the glance of Mariner and albatross. The reading I suggest here is not so different from the apparently more deflationary account offered in one of Auden's letters: "The chief reason for the choral interjections in Simeon's prose is to give the audience's attention a moment's rest."<sup>35</sup> Simeon's speech is almost unbearably tense in its demand for concentrated thought. The choral interjections transform his interior deliberation into external action. When Simeon concludes with a paraphrase of his words in the Gospel, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation,"<sup>36</sup> he is describing also this movement from argument to chorus:

SIMEON

And because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and

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<sup>35</sup> Letter to Stephen Spender, 29 April 1943, cited in Jacobs, "Introduction" xxxiii.

<sup>36</sup> Luke 2:29–30.

everywhere present. Therefore at every moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace.

CHORUS

*Its errors forgiven, may our Vision come home.*

(53)

Vision here stands for the attention which Simeon's meditation has required of us. That meditation adds up, not to an act of prideful assertiveness, but to an acknowledgment both of its own fallibility and of the existence of something infallible. Whatever faults we may believe we have discovered in the tone of Simeon's utterances are beside the point, for Simeon has already repented of them, and with the final blessing of the chorus Simeon, like the albatross, falls to his peaceful rest.

At the center of both the *Ancient Mariner* prints and "For the Time Being" we move from a way of seeing caught up in its own isolation from reality, and able to imagine only the death of all others, to one that recognizes blessing in the world, despite the seer's own culpability in sometimes falling into such isolating violence. This recognition takes place on the border between life and death, but does not control that border; it makes human community possible, not by establishing it, but by refraining from destroying it. While theologically significant, such acts are not religious rituals; they are ordinary, taking place, in the words of Simeon, "not in some prophetic vision of what might be, but with the eyes of our own weakness as to what actually is" (50). They do not differ in kind from the acts of the Jones and Auden's villains. We recognize the difference between good and bad when we recognize that such recognition is contingent, taking place only sometimes and between some people. This contingency becomes the thematic focus of these works' framing diptychs, which opposes the

temporal instability of our encounters with works of art to the regularity of religious observance.

The first and last of Jones's full-page plates for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* both depict the formation of a community around an act of vision. The vision in Print 8 is that of the priest, who gazes up at the altar he incenses while a fisherman and his family turn the corner to enter the church. Notably, Coleridge's poem does not in fact depict this gathering, but only alludes to it: it is the "goodly company" the Mariner's intends to join when he leaves the would-be Wedding Guest (67), who does not attend the communal ritual but rather goes home "a sadder and a wiser man" (68). Likewise, Jones's illustration shows the priest only obliquely through the church door, with the altar itself entirely hidden from view. Religious rite does not entirely exclude the Mariner's rime, but neither are they in straightforward continuity. Now compare this scene with that of the complementary Print 1: here we see a wedding party, dressed in more aristocratic fashion than the fishing folk in Print 8, processing into a church of neoclassical, which is to say, for Jones, of ambiguously Christian, architecture. Discussing this pair of prints, Dilworth suggests that "the superficial contrasts suggest the passage of time that allows for the transformation of newlyweds into family,"<sup>37</sup> and we can plausibly associate this transformation with Jones's belief in the implicitly religious character of all human creative endeavors. We can also, however, see the three men on the stairs as a collection of dandyish suitors vying for the bride's hand. The Wedding Guest, with his feathered hat and gloves, would from this perspective be another such suitor, and the way he holds his empty right glove in his left would suggest how hollow such a community must be.

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<sup>37</sup> Afterword to Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 97.





Illustration 7: David Jones, *Plates 1 and 8 of The Ancient Mariner*, 1931, copperplate, 17.5 by 13.5 cm ea. In Jones, *The Ancient Mariner*, 47 and 79. Copyright the Estate of David Jones, reproduced with permission.

The Mariner pulls the Wedding Guest away from this proto- or pseudo-community we see following after the alluring eyes of the bride. As a result, the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations go down a quite different path from that which leads to the recitation of vespers in Plate 8. The Mariner's community also involves recitation, but of a quite different character. The set rhythms of the liturgical hours ritually intimate the ultimate unity of every day with every other. The Mariner's ordeal, in contrast, arises "at an uncertain hour" and, moreover, directs him towards one particular auditor: "that moment that his face I see | I know the man that must hear me" (67). Rather than envisioning one communal body, despite the apparent plurality of congregants, the Mariner forces the Wedding Guest to look into his eyes only after he has seen

the Wedding Guest's own face. In Jones's illustration the two seem mirror images of one another, the Mariner's face only bearded and more deeply lined, which is to say, more reflective. The Mariner reaches insistently but gently towards the Guest through a wrought-iron railing which serves as an unwelcome reminder of the difference between them, and under an ephemeral arch formed by the Guest's feathered hat which hardly provides any common ground. The community formed here is not a poetic unity, but a recognition of the distance between them, and of the fact that their eyes meet only for the duration of the poem.

A similar contrast between what we might hope for from poetry, and what poetry actually offers us, unites the beginning and end of "For the Time Being." The first section, "Advent," is the most distant of any in the Oratorio from the dramatic action surrounding Joseph, Simeon, and Herod. It reflects rather on the very nature of time, in sequences whose quasi-musical modulations of meter and tone, varying tension and gradual complication, draw from poems like Yeats's "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Auden not only draws on these poets' forms, he also borrows freely from their words. The three choral lyrics in "Advent," Sections I, III, and V, introduce a Yeatsian apocalyptic quality on the brink of self-parody:

Winter completes an age  
With its thorough levelling:  
Heaven's tourbillions of rage  
Abolish the watchman's tower  
And delete the cedar grove.  
As winter completes an age,  
The eyes huddle like cattle, doubt  
Seeps into the pores and power  
Ebbs from the heavy signet ring:  
The prophet's lantern is out  
And gone the boundary-stone,

Cold the heart and cold the bone:  
Winter completes an age.  
(4)

These laments for the lost magic of tower and ring are accompanied by demands for its return: “We who must die demand a miracle” (8). Remembering that a miracle is a thing seen, we recognize that the concern of these lyrics is fundamentally visionary. The eyes of the huddled masses have no unifying focal point: “O where is that immortal and nameless Center from which our points of | Definition and death are all equi-distant?” (9). What we require is a religious rite that will bring all eyes to look in the same invisible direction.

In between these Yeatsian visions Auden uses Eliotic passages to distinguish this spiritual crisis from ordinary suffering; as the narrator observes in Section II of “Advent”<sup>38</sup>:

If that were all we should know how to manage. Flood, fire,  
The dessications of grasslands, restraint of princes,  
Piracy on the high seas, physical pain and fiscal grief,  
These after all are our familiar tribulations,  
And we have been through them all before many, many times.  
(5)

But that is not all. Rather,

It’s as if  
We have left our house for five minutes to mail a letter,  
And during that time the living room had changed places  
With the room behind the mirror over the fireplace;  
It’s as if, waking up with a start, we discovered  
Ourselves stretched out flat on the floor, watching our shadow  
Sleepily stretching itself out at the window.  
(6–7)

This last line recalls the feline fog in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” but the dominant

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<sup>38</sup> Auden remarked on this passage’s resemblance to Eliot in a letter to Theodore Spencer, calling it “too reminiscent of the Aged Eagle. I will alter them, if I can think of anything else, though I doubt it” (textual notes to Auden, *For the Time Being*, 72).

referent is *Four Quartets*, the first passage recalling *The Dry Salvages* I and its catalogue of destructive forces, and the second *East Coker* III and its train stopped between stations. *Four Quartets* also dominates Section IV, a recitative, from its image of “The garden [...] the only place there is,” to its injunction, reminiscent again of *East Coker* III: “Therefore, see without looking, hear without listening, breathe without asking” (9). The crisis the poem confronts is not yet the Incarnation, but something far more vague, which we can approach only through paradox. These passages further spiritualize the concerns of the Yeatsian lyrics, but do not fundamentally alter them: our problem is the fundamental unreality of our world, our inability to see beyond mirror and shadow, and what we require is a glimpse of the real.

In a poem about the Nativity such an emphasis is certainly appropriate. But by opening the Oratorio with this dilemma, Auden implicitly extends the possibility that, as we move into “For the Time Being,” the Oratorio itself will serve as the miraculously unifying focus, and the use of Yeatsian and Eliotic language bolsters this impression. Much of the task of “The Flight into Egypt” is to account for the failure of this possibility to be actualized. In doing so, it reveals the allusions to these high modernists to have been not lyrical endorsement, but dramatic positioning, making the voice of high modernism a character susceptible of evaluation. The final section begins with Joseph and Mary, who exit the Nativity story even as we do, into an Egypt where “we shall sigh | For lost insecurity” (62), much as, according to the narrator, we shall be tempted to pray, “lead us into temptation and evil for your sake” (65). The afterlife of the story, that is, will not be a continual re-enactment of a sacred drama of insecurity, temptation, and subsequent redemption, but rather an extension of Joseph’s secure silent witness. It is not enough to see in this development, as many have, an anti-nationalist

politics of exile.<sup>39</sup> We must also see that the alternative proposed to the temptation of ideal hieratic meaning is acceptance of the vagaries of time.

This alternative is further developed in the narrator's closing speech. Christmas has come and gone:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—  
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.  
(63)

This deflationary attitude is not a betrayal of the meaning of the Oratorio, but rather a fulfillment of it:

It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets  
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten  
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen  
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.  
(64)

Are we, the audience, among those who have seen the Child? In a literal sense, no; the Child is not among the *dramatis personae* of the Oratorio. But he plays a role akin to Coleridge's water snakes, which leaves us in a position somewhat like the Wedding Guest. The Oratorio offers us only an endlessly repeated, never fully effective attempt to remain aware of "the stable where for once in our lives | Everything became a You and nothing was an It" (64). Such an all-encompassing awareness resembles in many ways Yeats' "Everything we look upon is blest," but differs from it in two crucial respects. First, it has its source, not in our vision, but in the Child indirectly responsible for its transformation; second, it involves, not a unifying mood, but a recognition of separation. We cannot bring about our own recognition of the distance

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Caserio, "Auden's New Citizenship" and Jenkins, "Auden in America."

between “I” and “you,” or in any other sense control when the vision repeats itself, any more than the Mariner has a say in his choice of audience.

The inner and the outer asymmetries do not collapse into one another. We reject the solipsistic curse of Herod and Life-in-Death, and follow the blessing of Simeon and Mariner; the point of “He stoppeth one of three” and “The Flight into Egypt,” on the other hand, is not to condemn religious ritual, but only to say that poetry is not it. The fragmentary drama of the poem must not be mistaken for the unified vision of a true liturgy. But if these works do not purport to be sacred, still each remains a kind of ritual, both in the looser sense discussed in the first chapter, and in the sense discussed at this chapter’s beginning. These works do not attempt to forge *ex nihilo* an abstract *sensus communis*, but neither do they resign themselves to the arbitrary judgment of their audience. Instead, they seek a human form, simultaneously sensuous and reasonable, which the audience can recognize as such—all the while knowing that, like the horse led to water, the audience remains free to reject it.

#### CHAPTER 4: THE PROBLEM OF POETIC FRATRICIDE

Anyone who has read both chapter ten of Thomas Dilworth's *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet*, about Jones's 1937 prose-poem epic *In Parenthesis*, and chapter eight of Edward Mendelson's *Later Auden*, about Auden's 1944 closet drama "The Sea and the Mirror" has been witness to one of the more peculiar coincidences in modernist literary criticism. Dilworth argues that *In Parenthesis* contains traces of Jones's unconscious guilt over the untimely death of his unloved older brother Harold:

[A] large part of [David's] childhood involved struggle with his brother for their mother's affection. David had been winning and, in retaliation Harold tormented him. [...] Feelings towards siblings are seldom completely suppressed, and David probably wished Harold dead. [...] Part of the deep underlying meaning of *In Parenthesis* involves re-enactment of that death, which was, for David, emotionally fratricidal.<sup>1</sup>

Mendelson, meanwhile, suggests that "The Sea and the Mirror" reflects Auden's feeling that, had an older brother not died *in utero*, he himself might never have been born:

Children make guilty equations. "The Sea and the Mirror" expiates the guilt of a child who believes his existence depends on the absence of another child, and who, somewhere outside the realm of conscious thought, suspects that, in defiance of the adult logic of space and time, he murdered the absent child in order to achieve his own birth afterward.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, according to Jones's and Auden's respective biographers, each of these works explores its author's feeling that, though he did not in any literal sense murder his brother, he was still, through something like Freudian magical thinking, in some sense responsible for his brother's death.

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<sup>1</sup> Dilworth, *David Jones*, 242.

<sup>2</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 535.

What are we to make of these discussions of magical fratricide? I believe these commentaries contain an important critical insight. Indeed, noticing their resemblance to one another validated (though it did not initiate) the comparison undertaken in this chapter. The biographical components of these discussions, however, do not do the explanatory work which Dilworth and Mendelson seem to imagine. Undoubtedly, Jones did have an older brother who died at nineteen, and Auden's mother did have a miscarriage before he was born. It is certainly possible that these events left lasting scars, and that these scars had their effect on the work these writers produced. But we must remember two things.

First, there is no reason to assume that the psychological effects Dilworth and Mendelson point us toward would be more or less important than those deriving from, say, the time Jones spent as a soldier in the Great War, or that Auden spent in British public schools first as student, then as teacher. Jones felt himself never to have escaped the trenches, while Auden was throughout his career accused of a juvenile obsession with schoolyard cliques and schoolroom discipline. We might reasonably imagine that these homosocial environments, often described as forging a spiritual brotherhood set apart from the uninitiated, brought about Jones's and Auden's particular interest in the topic of fraternal conflict. The presence of the fratricidal theme in these poets' work is hence overdetermined.

Second, and more importantly, its presence in these *particular* works is *underdetermined*. Not only did other poets undergo similar experiences without writing works such as these, but Jones and Auden themselves were over a decade into their artistic careers before they did so. Facts about their childhood and youth cannot explain why fratricide came to the foreground when it allegedly did, and not before. Determination problems of this kind will



inevitably arise whenever we approach poetic works as unconscious symptoms rather than intelligent acts. Rather than see *In Parenthesis* and “The Sea and the Mirror” as determined by their authors’ enchanted thinking about fratricide, we ought to see them as responses to and explorations of the conjunction of fratricide and magic. Since magic, for both of these poets, serves as an ambiguously fraught synonym for poetry, we might rephrase this by saying that these works are about the ways in which poetry can tend towards fratricide.

All this is to say that the fratricidal theme in these two works has less to do with Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* than with Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*. For Bloom, the strong poem enters a cultural *agon* against a predecessor imagined as an elder sibling, and can survive only by somehow murdering the poem it takes as its rival. This fratricidal impulse further shapes the poem’s relationship with its audience: it hopes its readers will imitate it, but cannot allow these imitations to surpass its own power. Finally, fratricide shapes the place of the poetic arena within the broader culture, with poetry trying to establish its independence from other forms of cultural authority like politics or religion.<sup>3</sup> For Jones and Auden, too, I would suggest, these three conflicts are connected. The spiritual brotherhood of poetry suffers from fratricidal violence, but is also constituted by that violence. Metaphors for the relation of author to would-be author always have a double valence: initiation involves both recruitment and discipline; seduction involves both desire and domination. And the enclosed

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<sup>3</sup> See Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*. Though Bloom casts his theory in Freudian terms, the opening chapter on Shakespeare and Marlowe in the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence* makes clear that the relationships in question are often rather between contemporaries than between moderns and ancients. The latter case, as Jeffrey Perl remarks, is really not an anxiety of influence at all so much as an anxiety of renaissance (see Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity*, 164).

poetic community may depend on the would-be universal cathedral (army companies have chaplains, schools have religious affiliations), but it also needs to set itself apart. In sum, the image of a fratricidal community pictures the simultaneous hostility and kinship of poem for poem, poet for audience, poetic subculture for religious culture.

For the gnostic Bloom, the agon of poetry is its tragic glory. The credal Christians Jones and Auden, however, see it as a problem, and one which requires a solution. In this they are less like Bloom than like René Girard, who wrote little about lyric poetry, but whose work resonates strongly with this idea of poetic fratricide. For Girard, the logic of mimetic desire first turns the poet violently against the very poems which first turned him toward poetry, then establishes, through the murder of a scapegoat, a community united by its complicity in mimetic violence. Girard agrees with Bloom that this violence is tragic, but doubts the value of the tragic worldview, and suggests that the true task of poetry is not to engage in this agon but rather to find a way to escape it.<sup>4</sup> Girard's view is closer to that I find in Jones and Auden, but still, I think, not quite the same as theirs. (It may be closer to Eliot's sense of the need for poetic martyrdom, for more on which see chapter six.) In any case, I will pursue neither a Bloomian nor a Girardian reading of these poets' works. My aim, rather, is explicate the theme

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<sup>4</sup> See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. The resonances between Bloom and Girard's theories are intriguing, particularly when we consider the fratricidal rather than oedipal aspects of Bloom's theory. Such consideration involves simply tempering Bloom's Freudianism with Girard's critique of Freud: "The rival to be revealed is almost never the father, a rival of the past, the idol buried in the unconscious, but the present and future rival reduced by psychoanalysis to a bit part in a drama really performed on 'another scene'" (Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 56). For a comparison of Bloom and Girard on poetic violence, see Schneider, "Mimetic Polemicism."

of poetic fratricide as Jones and Auden both seem to have understood it, an understanding most developed in these two fratricidally obsessed poems.

To glimpse Jones's and Auden's concern with specifically *poetic* fratricide we needn't look beyond these poems' title pages. *In Parenthesis*: the phrase evokes a phenomenological bracketing, asking what remains of a person when we have only a part of his life translated into poetry. The book suggests one answer with its Welsh epigraph, "seinnnyessit e gledyf ym penn mameu,"<sup>5</sup> meaning, as Jones's endnote tells us, "his sword rang in mothers' heads" (191). By not mentioning the slain sons, this phrase subtly suggests that the "mothers" are somehow "his," that the he in question here is, in some poetic sense—for Jones, Welsh was the language of poetic enchantment<sup>6</sup>—killing his own brothers, and killing them with ringing, with the chimes of poetry. Similarly, the epigraph to "The Sea and the Mirror," from Emily Brontë, raises the tempting spectre of a world where "my own soul can grant my prayer,"<sup>7</sup> and so of a world where no other prayer-granting entities (human or divine) are necessary. The title, however, insists that we associate such attempts to see others as mere mirrors of ourselves with death by drowning, a possibility further emphasized by the subtitle's mention of *The Tempest*. That play itself, recall, centers on two pairs of brothers seeking to kill their brothers, and on a magician-artist who ends by drowning his books. A central question for both works will be: can poetry be anything other than fratricidal? And if not, is there anything we can do with it other than cast it into the sea?

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, *In Parenthesis* unnumbered title page. Citations henceforth parenthetical by page number.

<sup>6</sup> See Jones's essays on Wales in Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, especially "Welsh Poetry."

<sup>7</sup> Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, 1. Citations henceforth parenthetical by page number.

Jones and Auden took great care to avoid their books becoming the kind one drowns. They were not even to have the look of enchanted codices. Jones sought to have his friend René Hague “print the thing in long columns like a newspaper, in ‘Joanna’ type face,” though the publisher deemed these deviations from the usual printing process too expensive.<sup>8</sup> And though some critics draw an unfortunate analogy between Jones’s typesetting preferences and his desire as a poet “to step out of language’s common everyday use,”<sup>9</sup> in fact the one was meant to counterbalance the other, resisting the boundary-drawing between poetry and ordinary life that poetic language can seem to invite. He wanted the textual surface to resemble a newspaper, or, as he put it elsewhere, “the new *Tablet Publishing Company’s Memorandum & Article of Association*.” It was to exude an aura of functionality, “not ‘artistic’ in any way.”<sup>10</sup> Auden similarly (and more successfully) objected to his publisher’s typographical choices: “You would never think of using such a font for, say, ‘The Embryology of the Elasmobranch Liver’, so why use it for poetry? I feel strongly that ‘aesthetic’ books should not be put in a special class.”<sup>11</sup> *In Parenthesis* and “The Sea and the Mirror” were intended (however implausibly) to sit on the same bookshelves as legal documents and biology textbooks, achieving a contiguity with ordinary life which disenchant in quite a different manner than does endless meta-theatricality. Jerome McGann has suggested that modernist fine-art printing “put a frame around romantic writing (as Brecht threw a frame around realistic drama),” revealing poetic enchantment to be the mere “rhetorical display” of the “self-consciously constructed book.”<sup>12</sup> I find this argument

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, 195.

<sup>9</sup> Stanbridge, “The Making of David Jones’s *Anathemata*,” 387.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted Dilworth, *David Jones*, 186.

<sup>11</sup> 13 June 1944 letter to Bennett Cerf, quoted in Kirsch, “Introduction” xlii.

<sup>12</sup> McGann, *Black Riders*, 21.

plausible, and would align Jones's and Auden's resistance to aestheticized textual surfaces with what we explored in Chapter Three, their resistance to anti-theatrical debunking.

If the anti-theatrical impulse compels us to drown our books in self-conscious construction, Jones and Auden hope instead that we will be able to close the book on the individual poem. To see what I mean by this, we should look at one of the key differences between the poets Jones and Auden and the literary theorists Bloom and Girard. For Jones and for Auden, while poetry involves violence against one's poetic brethren, even before this it involves violence against one's human self. The original bond of poetic brotherhood binds the artist *qua* artist to the artist *qua* human being. The human being wields his artistic faculty as an enchanted weapon, but inevitably finds himself wounded by it; he cannot call what he has made a work of art until he lays that weapon down and returns from the community of art to that of life. The formal structures of both of these works follow this trajectory, and it is in this structure that we first begin to see the similarities between them.

#### 1. *In Parenthesis*: Brother-Keeping and Mirror-Gazing

*In Parenthesis* is a narrative in seven parts, following a battalion of mixed English and Welsh soldiers in the six months leading up to the battle of the Somme. Parts I–III concern the journey from England to the front line; Part IV depicts a day in the trenches; and Parts V–VII show preparations for the climactic battle, and then the battle itself. Almost all of the named characters die in Part VII, near the end of which a mysterious figure named the Queen of the Woods emerges to bless their corpses. The only named exceptions to the general slaughter are Dai Greatcoat and John Ball, both authorial alter-egos. Dai appears only in Part IV, where he

gives his famous boast, in which he speaks both as universal soldier and as universal artist; he is mentioned again only in Part VII, as an absence, when the Queen cannot find him anywhere. Ball acts as focal character throughout, but in most of the book he seems little more than the embodiment of everyman. The greatest exceptions come at the end of Part III, when Ball uses his rifle apparently for the first time and then has a dream-vision while on watch duty, and that of VII, when he is shot in the leg, discards his rifle, and is taken away by stretcher-bearers, meanwhile catching a glimpse of the Queen of the Woods.

Such is the plot of the book, so far as it goes. The story is stripped to its bare essentials, with a minimum of anecdote, its characters barely defined, often no more than a name, though over the course of the book the reader comes to have quite strong associations regarding at least some of them. The book is less concerned with the normal trappings of narrative than with the juxtaposition of raw naturalistic description of trench life with a barrage of literary allusion. Endnotes are helpfully supplied on both accounts, for the former, to define soldierly acronyms and other jargon, for the latter, to identify often obscure religious, mythic, historical, and folkloric reference points. The book opens with a seven-page preface, which aims to depict the trenches as enabling a distinctive kind of cultural life, with the foot soldier as source of its artistry and bardic memory. The preface and endnotes both speak in the voice of the author, reflecting on the making of the work of which they are a part. Within the body of the work, the poetic voice is almost always impersonal, in the simple sense that the reader does not have the sense that any particular person lies behind the profusion of mythic allusions and analogies.

At least, the poetic voice appears impersonal. The narrative ends, however, with a challenge to this way of reading it:

The geste says this and the man who was on the field ... and the man who wrote the book ... the man who does not know this has not understood anything.<sup>48</sup> (187)

I take these lines to be the key to *In Parenthesis*. We can begin to turn them by following the “48” to the book’s last endnote, hence its last attempt to forgive its readers their lack of understanding. We are told here that these phrases quote the *Chanson de Roland*, lines 2095–8, given now in French. There follows a phrase which hints in several ways at the relationship this book establishes with its poetic brethren: “I have used Mr. René Hague’s translation” (225). First, Jones suggests that he reads in translation (as in fact he did, bemoaning frequently that he was a hopeless monoglot<sup>13</sup>), and hence depends, not merely on other dead poets for material, but on other living poets for help understanding that material. Contrast this with the coldly satirical notes to *The Waste Land*, which mention translation only three times, each in reference to Sanskrit texts. These never admit that Eliot uses translations himself, stating flatly, for instance, that “a translation is found in Deussen’s *Sechzig Upanishads des Veda*,” as if for the benefit only of those who do not read Sanskrit (but who do, presumably, read German).<sup>14</sup> Second, Jones emphasizes that *he* reads in translation. Eliot’s notes use the first person rarely and reluctantly, and only when a more objective source cannot be located, whether because the datum is only “a phenomenon I have always noted,” or because “I forget” its origin.<sup>15</sup> Jones’s notes tell us over and over that he is the one who was on the field, who knows the names of every piece of military equipment and remembers each song the soldiers would sing. Finally, and most subtly, Jones selects his translation not on scholarly grounds, but because it was

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 16, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 75.

written by René Hague, his lifelong friend, hence extending the theme of poetic brotherhood to encompass the person of the present-day author.

In sum, the notes emphasize throughout that *In Parenthesis* concerns the personal experiences of the author David Jones, and the relationship of those experiences to poetry. But the relationship between these two remains a problem, and one about which we know little—hence the constellation drawn from Roland of three men who are the same man, the fighter, the writer, and the know-nothing. We ought to pay particular attention to moments when all three are present.

One such moment comes early in Part VII, as the members of ‘B’ Company, while under heavy bombardment, wait for the order to attack:

But he made them a little lower than the angels and their inventions are according to right reason even if you don’t approve the end to which they proceed; so that there was rectitude even in this, which the mind perceived at this moment of weakest flesh and all the world shrunken to a point of fear that has affinity, I suppose, to that state of deprivation predicate of souls forfeit of their final end, who nevertheless know a good thing when they see it. (154)

The distinction the speaker draws here, one Jones’s later theoretical writings would endorse, is between *ars* and *prudentia*, between things rightly made and so good in themselves, and actions rightly performed and so reflecting well on whoever performed them. Soldiers, as Jones understood them, were a kind of artist, and warfare a kind of art.<sup>16</sup> The irony lurking in this understanding is a central theme of *In Parenthesis*: even if the shells threaten your life, you can still, if only from a distance, perceive them to be well-wrought shells.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 157.



As a statement of the theory the sentence quoted above is clear enough, albeit startling in its hellish (and theologically sophisticated) simile. Jones has, however, woven into the passage two further levels of irony. On the first, the reader recognizes the possibility of an even greater affinity between the souls in hell looking at “a good thing” and the “them” whose “inventions are according to right reason”: If the frightened victims of misdirected artistry resemble the damned in their fright, the perpetrators of misdirected artistry might well resemble the damned in their damnation. The second level of irony looks to the speaker of these words, who first addresses himself, hypothetically, as the “you” of “even if you don’t approve,” and then affirms his personal presence with the reluctant “I suppose.” These, too, stand in analogy to one another: the physically fearful “you,” forced to admit the artistic rectitude of the enemy’s destructive inventions, resembles the spiritually deprived “I,” forced to admit the artistic rectitude of the simile comparing the “point of fear” to “that state of deprivation.” The analogy between the “man who was on the field” and the “man who wrote the book” is thus the subject of this passage’s central irony—although, since the reluctant speaker of these words seems hardly aware of it, he remains “the man who [...] has not understood anything.”

The passage we have been looking at stands alone, isolated by white space before and after, and we know the identity underlying neither of its pronouns. By this point in the book, however, the referent of the narratorial “you” has been clearly established as John Ball, the nearly mute every-soldier, whose raw experience provides the sense data for the book’s lovingly detailed descriptions of trench life. The word “I,” in contrast, while it shows up in dialogue throughout the book, has from the tongue of the narrator no clearly established meaning, save

to remind us inescapably of the repeated use of “I” in the boast of Dai Greatcoat. This mythic archetype of the soldier-poet does little else than describe himself over the course of five pages in Part IV. He uses the word “I” twenty-eight times in five pages, for a ratio of about one “I” for every 41 syllables.<sup>17</sup> It would distract from our argument to attempt a comprehensive reading of the boast, but we must, at the very least, determine what Dai means when he speaks in the first person.

The question is complicated by the boast’s status as one of the great set-pieces of *In Parenthesis*, firmly cementing the book’s status as poetry rather than prose, and also as one of the few passages amenable to isolation and anthologization.<sup>18</sup> Such extraction is particularly enticing because the boast can be heard as a metonym for the book as a whole, giving us in compressed form the ultimate meaning of *In Parenthesis*. So Kathleen Henderson Staudt, for example, noticing Dai’s claim that “You ought to ask: why, | what is this, | what’s the meaning of this” (84), suggests that Jones himself, in writing his book, intends for his readers “to bear witness to dehumanizing historical experience and to ask ‘Why?’”<sup>19</sup> An analogy between Dai and Jones is encouraged not only by the boast’s insistent use of “I” and by its location near the center of the work, but also by the resemblance between the name of Dai, a Welsh nickname for David, and that of Jones himself. As we saw, however, discussing the paragraph quoted above, an analogy is not the same as an equation, and we should be wary of treating Dai’s “I” as

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<sup>17</sup> 1 in 41 is several times the typical frequency of the word “I” in literary English, but more importantly is several orders of magnitude higher than the typical frequency of “I” in *In Parenthesis*. The word appears 28 times in the span of these five pages, and only 38 times, by my count, in the remaining 165 pages of narrative.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. in Stephens, *A Book of Wales*.

<sup>19</sup> Staudt, *At the Turn of A Civilization*, 63.

Jones's own. Not that we should approach Dai with the suspicion appropriate to a dramatic monologue by Browning or Eliot, as if the point were to see through the surface of the character being sketched to the truth underneath. As Patrick Deane suggests, Jones's monologues are not mimetic in the usual sense; rather, Jones thinks "of individual speakers as in some sense versions of each other, and of disparate speech acts as repeats in time."<sup>20</sup> The boast is uttered less by an individual character than by an isolated archetypal principle, existing on a mythic plane where interpretation of the speaker's "personality" can seem irrelevant.

We need not psychologize, however, in order to treat Dai's boast as just that, a boast, a speech act, taking place in a specific context which is not the context of *In Parenthesis* as a whole (even if it is analogous). Vincent Sherry helpfully points out that Dai responds to another, shorter, boast, that of Nobby Clark, and that before Dai speaks he adjusts his shoulder straps as if preparing for battle—not the only time his speech will compare poetic to military strife.<sup>21</sup> If the analogical chain extends to *In Parenthesis* itself, we are invited to see it as a "war book" not only in the literal sense of the phrase, but also in the sense of intra-poetic conflict. There is some evidence that Jones did so extend it—as reported by William Blissett, the idea for *In Parenthesis* emerged after Jones "read *All Quiet on the Western Front* when it was translated by his friend A. W. Wheen (1929) and said to himself, 'I can do better than that.'"<sup>22</sup> Even without such an emblematic quotation, we could infer the analogy from the historical fact that *In Parenthesis* was begun in the midst of a boom in quasi-memoirs of the Great War, and

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<sup>20</sup> Deane, "David Jones, T. S. Eliot, and the Modernist Unfinished," 79.

<sup>21</sup> Sherry, "A New Boast for *in Parenthesis*," 114.

<sup>22</sup> Blissett, *The Long Conversation*, 104.

published several years after that boom had peaked.<sup>23</sup> But there is also evidence against—Jones writes in the preface that “I did not intend this as a war book—it happens to be concerned with war” (xii) (I will return to this puzzling remark in the next chapter). Dai’s boast, conversely, does not establish *In Parenthesis* as Jones’s own quasi-military competitive boast, so much as it raises the question.

Both fratricide and the metaphor of poetry as violence run throughout Dai’s boast. They enter with the first catalog of impossible assertions (which respond to the audience interrupting his boast skeptically: “Wot about Methuselum?”):

I was with Abel when his brother found him,  
under the green tree.  
I built a shit-house for Artaxerxes.  
I was the spear in Balin’s hand  
                    that made waste King Pellam’s land.  
I took the smooth stones of the brook,  
I was with Saul,  
playing before him.  
I saw him armed like Derfel Gatheren.  
                    (79–80)

Dai seems to delight in challenging us to fit together these disparate claims. That concerning Abel introduces the theme of fratricide, and is more difficult to decipher than it might seem: who was with Abel when Cain found him, other than Cain himself? The second assigns Dai a role humble but instrumentally necessary, devoted to the sanitary functioning of the human body. The third identifies Dai as the instrument itself (suggesting one possible solution to the first: is Dai the weapon with which Cain slew Abel?). It also reminds us of the danger of fratricide—in Malory, Balin and his brother Balan kill one another when they fail to recognize

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<sup>23</sup> Jones read many of these books, as Thomas Dilworth points out (Dilworth, *David Jones*, 128).

one another's disguises—and links it to the ruin of the entire community through the myth of the fisher king. Dai then lays claim to his biblical namesake, or perhaps to his namesake's sling, used to kill Goliath (and so preserve the lives of, among others, David's brothers), and also to his harp, another tension-bearing instrument, this one used to play before another king (and so preserve the health of Saul). Finally, Dai claims, not to be, but merely to see, someone akin to a soldier-saint capable of harrowing Hell. Is Dai's own position analogous to damnation?

These lines establish the axes along which Dai lives his uncertain existence. Is Dai essentially passive (“I was with”), agential (“I built”), instrumental (“I was the spear”), or perceiving (“I saw”)? Later variants such as the verbless “I the foxfire” and the atemporal “I am '62 Socrates” suggest additional complications without offering any resolution (80). Jones does not seem to be endorsing any one of these descriptions, but rather to be articulating a form of life in which all of them become imaginable. Similarly, does Dai engage in rivalrous fraternal relations, like Cain's and Balin's, or charitable ones, like David's? Does he make waste kingdoms or play before them? What relation do his activities bear to religious salvation? These questions run through the remainder of Dai's boast, which is also a miniature mythic history of Britain. Dai emphasizes, for example, his service to Brân the Blessed, a mythic king whose attempts to make peace with Ireland were undone by his half-brother, and whose head was then buried in London to ward off invasion. Specifically, Dai built Brân's tomb: “under the White Tower | I trowelled the inhuming mortar” (81). Does this count as working with fetid, fertile “shit,” or with the sterile “smooth stones” metonymically linked with music? When Dai builds, he has the potential to build with any of these things.

Dai is not so amorphous as to have no identity at all. He is the universal soldier, present at every battle from those of Henry V back to that of St. Michael with Lucifer. But what does it mean to be a soldier? What does it mean that there are soldiers? Dai's welter of mythological allusions only asks the question over and over again. For example, much of Dai's boast consists of a history of Britain focused on how "expeditionary war" arose from Arthur's "huge pride, and overreach of his imperium," and "because of the keeper of promises," and "because of foreign machinations" (82). These passages reinforce our sense that war often involves injustice and misadventure, and further, as Paul Robichaud has noted, they strike again the note of fratricide: "The Malorian texture of *In Parenthesis* presents the destruction of the Round Table as analogy for the destruction of fellowship on the western front."<sup>24</sup> They do not, however, say anything about what this destruction means, but present only further paradoxes. The Brân whom Dai invokes against expeditionary war—"O Brân confound the counsel of the councillors, O blessèd head hold the striplings from the narrow sea" (83)—was in Jones's sources directly involved with such expeditions. These aspects of the boast leave me suspicious of any reading in which Dai acts as a quasi-Socratic questioner, guiding us to a deeper awareness of the reality of war. Rather than unravel Dai's logic, we need to look at how he places himself in his own utterances.

The riddling first-person pronouns accumulate again near the end of Dai's boast, when he confronts Christ on the cross. Sherry reads these closing strophes as establishing that "Christ is indeed the analogue and archetype of the agent-victim Dai," proposing this as the solution to

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<sup>24</sup> Robichaud, "The Undoing of All Things," 149.

the puzzle.<sup>25</sup> It is true that Dai “served Longinus that Dux bat-blind and bent; | the dandy Xth are my regiment,” and that he recognizes the “Five Sufficient Blossoms” born of Christ’s salvific act (83), as we cannot imagine any of the soldiers in the 1919 sketch doing. But let us avoid over-stretching the point, lest we engage in the “overreach of his imperium” which Dai attributes to Arthur. Dai does not himself hang on the tree; rather:

With my long pilum  
I beat the crow  
from that heavy bough.  
(83)

This ambiguous act might be a charitable warding off of scavengers from Christ’s body, or an allusion to the centurion who put a spear in Christ’s side. Christ’s act is different in kind:

I heard Him cry:  
*Apples ben ripe in my gardayne*  
I saw Him die.  
(83)

We have here again Dai the perceiver of a good he cannot possess, now perceiving the words of God, which, uniquely among those of the boast, are italicized, set apart from Dai’s own utterance. Dai sees Christ die, but will not join him. As ‘B’ Company insists in its choral response to Dai: “Old soljers never die they | Simply fade away” (84). Dai the universal soldier vanishes like the figure in the mirror, soon after witnessing the ultimate result of the violent impulse with which his boast began.

The “old soljers” song exemplifies Jones’s technique of adapting sentimental commonplaces for more complex aesthetic purposes. The image of soldiers as brothers-in-arms is another such cliché. *In Parenthesis* does not over-use the image, but what fraternal imagery it

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<sup>25</sup> Sherry, “A New Boast for *in Parenthesis*,” 122.

does adopt it almost always shapes to place the emphasis, not on the assurance of fraternal charity, but on the threat of sibling rivalry, of the kind suggested by the flying between Nobby Clark and Dai Greatcoat. One of the most important such moments comes when Dai's name is first mentioned, in the form "Dai de la Cote male taile" (70), nine pages before his famous boast. He appears in a catalog of the members of 'B' Company, introduced as follows: "From where John Ball sat and did his brother-keeping, mirror-gazing, in the corner of the fire-bay, he could easily observe the disposition of his companions [...]" (69). The phrase "brother-keeping" alludes to the story of Cain and Abel—central, we saw, to Dai's boast—while "mirror-gazing" introduces a note of narcissism. Jones seems to wonder here: can human beings look at one another as brothers without one murdering the other or (what may in a spiritual sense be the same thing) each collapsing the other into a mirror image of himself? Can rival works of art achieve an analogous coexistence?

These questions arise in Part IV of VII, the structural center of *In Parenthesis*. This does not mean that Dai's boast is the inner truth of *In Parenthesis*, but rather that the book centers on Private Ball's mirror-gazing at the always-fading Dai Greatcoat, who serves and sees but never suffers. With this encounter Jones explores the contours of the martial-artistic form of life which the rest of the book shows Ball first approaching and then leaving behind. By placing this encounter in Part IV, Jones suggests that Ball can see into what it means to be a soldier only as a result of the movement traced in Parts I–III, which culminated in his first act of war, firing his rifle at the end of Part III; and that, after this encounter, Ball moves gradually further away from this vision, until at the end of Part VII, Dai is not to be found anywhere, and Ball discards his rifle. What I have just described is not the usual way of reading the narrative,



which considers Part VII to be Ball's final initiation into battle. But it helps us to account both for the work's reduplication of authorial stand-ins, and for Ball's symbolically fraught struggle with his rifle.

Jones gives us many hints that Ball, as well as Dai, should be seen in relation to his author. They begin with his first arrival, late, on the parade ground at the start of Part I, eight pages after Jones ended the preface by describing himself as "a knocker-over of piles, a parade's despair" (xv), and run throughout Ball's experiences, which closely track Jones's own, including the wound in his leg at the book's end.<sup>26</sup> The very fact, however, that both Dai and Ball can be seen as figures for the author makes it difficult to read either as naively autobiographical. Nor will it suffice to say that they represent different aspects of Jones's experience—Ball as the body, Dai as the voice, for example—unless we also recognize that the book freights the only encounter between the two aspects with intense significance. This encounter is like that between "you" and "I," the pronouns *In Parenthesis* closely associates with Ball and Dai, respectively. The "I" of Dai is the eternal soldier, the eternal artist, and, figuratively, the artist of *In Parenthesis* itself; in contrast, the "you" of Ball makes him a figure for the audience, for every potential member of the audience, and for the author as human spectator of his own artistic activities. Ball's encounter with Dai is the encounter of an ordinary human being and would-be artist with the exemplar of the artist *qua* artist, a category to which Ball is not particularly good at conforming.

The ends of Parts III and VII show us Ball's greatest struggles to conform. Both center on Ball's relationship to his rifle, which is to say, to the modern equivalent of "the spear in

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<sup>26</sup> Dilworth, *David Jones*, 42.

Balin's hand" with which Dai identifies himself (note the name Ball hidden inside Balin). In his preface, Jones identifies this soldier-rifle relationship as one of his book's central aesthetic problems:

Yet must we do gas-drill, be attuned to many newfangled technicalities, respond to increasingly exacting mechanical devices; some fascinating and compelling, others sinister in the extreme; all requiring a new and strange direction of the mind, a new sensitivity certainly, but at a considerable cost.

We who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and who presume to other and more radiant affinities, are finding it difficult, as yet, to recognize these creatures of chemicals as true extensions of ourselves, that we may feel for them a native affection, which alone can make them magical for us. (xiv)

This passage is, in my view, almost always misread, with grievous consequences for the interpretation of *In Parenthesis*. What is needed is not to cast a spell on the newfangled technicalities; that which is fascinating, compelling, sinister, is magical already. Rather, what is needed is to make it magical *for us*, to incorporate its magic into our world so that it does not alienate us from ourselves. Our difficulty is not so much achieving enchantment as achieving the right kind of disenchantment—a kind that is only possible after we acknowledge the enchantment's power. Disenchantment is the task of the end of Part VII; enchantment, that of the end of Part III.

Part III's closing scene reveals to us above all the enchanting power of John Ball's rifle. Ball stands "brother-keeper and ward-watcher" for apparently the first time (51), and then uses his rifle against the enemy, also apparently his first expression of soldierly agency. Jones emphasizes the difficulty of this expression, figured in the finger-numbing cold of the gun's metal in the December weather:

You draw out warm finger-tips:  
Your split knuckles fumbling, foul some keen, chill-edged, jack-spike jutting.  
(53)

In a familiar paradox, the numbing of Ball's fingers, so painful that "You could weep," though it makes him less aware of, and gives him less control over, the physical state of the gun, does not thereby make him less responsible for its effects. Rather, it forces him to be exceptionally deliberate, overcoming the reluctance of his resistant body. First, "You remember the word of the staff instructor" on proper use of the rifle; then, "You very gradually increase the finger-pressure to-ward and up-ward"; after the shot fires "You draw back the bolt, you feel 'the empty' hollow-lob," *et cetera* (53). Of eleven consecutive paragraphs (taking each indentation to make a paragraph, whether the following lines are printed as verse or prose), eight begin with the letters "You."

The repeated pronoun reinforces to the reader that whatever follows, whatever Ball perceives over the next page, is in some sense a result of his own activity. First, Ball hears the startling sound of the gunshot:

The hollow-places and the upright things give back their mimicry, each waking other, shockt far out. Short before his parapet, disturbed wire tangs oddly for the erratic ricochet. (53)

Next, and more importantly, he hears the alteration in the silence that follows:

And the deepening stillness as a calm, cast over us—a potent influence over us and him—dead-calm for this Sargasso dank, and for the creeping things. (53–54)

As Dilworth points out, Jones's language here recalls Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, suggesting that the rifle-shot echoes the crossbow bolt that killed the albatross.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Coleridge's poem, however, our attention is not directed to the moral justifiability or not of Ball's act, but rather

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<sup>27</sup> Dilworth, *Reading David Jones*, 48.

to the appearance of the form of life into which such acts enter. The movement here is echoed and elaborated in Jones's preface, which speaks of "the sudden violences and the long stillnesses" of the Waste Land of the front, and how it "profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment" (x). In the lines just quoted we see Ball's irreversible initiation into the community of soldiers, defined by its simultaneous enchantment of rifle and no-man's-land, which is to say also by its division of the world into "us" and the enemy's "him."

The passage that follows begins in the silence left behind by the rifle-shot, but moves quickly to a more uncanny image:

You can hear the silence of it:  
you can hear the rat of no-man's land  
(54)

We understand clearly that Ball is hearing the scurrying of the rats, but the narrator does not say this, not immediately. Rather, the rat *is* the silence. Ball hears the rats because, in the void left behind by the rifle-shot, he is left to imagine the results of that rifle-shot, and pictures scavengers consuming the dead bodies such rifle-shots produce. Ball sees the rats with a curiously sympathetic eye, picturing them as birds of prey who "suffer with us this metamorphosis" into creatures of earth, descending into the dirt just as the human beings who usually walk upon it have become soldiers dug into trenches. The figuring of soldiers as wingless-bird-rats has two key implications. First, that what soldiers do is natural, not subject to moral censure, and, indeed, potentially able to "redeem the time of our uncharity." Second, that, being *merely* natural, it is at the same time a falling off from the spiritual possibilities of human beings, imagined as the flight of the "white-tailed eagle" or "speckled kite." The

difference lies not only in the rat's winglessness, a figure for their lack of spiritual aspirations, but also in their "bead-eyed feast," against the birds "whose proud eyes watched | the broken emblems." Against the visionary eagles, the rats with their "patient workings" are humble artisans (54).

Ball himself, in listening so closely and so imaginatively to the silence of no-man's land, becomes the patient, earth-bound rat-soldier-artist. This act of absorbed attention metamorphoses remarkably smoothly into a much different state of absorption, that of sleep:

It's so very still.

Your body fits the crevice of the bay in the most comfortable fashion imaginable.

It's cushy enough.

(55)

Jones explores here the double valence of enchantment, the slippage between paying such close attention that self-consciousness ceases, and ceasing altogether to be conscious. The sequel to Ball's dozing off is comic and deflationary: "The relief elbows him on the fire-step: All quiet china?—bugger all to report?—kipping mate?—christ, mate—you'll 'ave 'em all over" (55). The juxtaposition highlights the multiple senses of soldiering in play here. In one sense, by falling asleep, Ball has again acted the bad soldier, and indeed committed a court-marshallable offense. But the interruption of Ball's nap mirrors the response of 'B' Company to Dai's boast, suggesting that this failure of brother-keeping is in a way the most soldierly deed Ball has performed up to this point. By immersing himself in rat-infested no-man's-land, Ball has enchanted himself with the spell Dai weaves through his rhythmic words.

This enchantment is unwound by Ball's corresponding struggle with the rifle at the end of Part VII. This sequence begins when Ball is struck in the leg by a bullet and falls painfully to

the ground. The narrator, departing from his usual approach, relates to us Ball's immediate response through third-person indirect discourse: "He thought it disproportionate in its violence considering the fragility of us" (183). The referent of "it" remains provocatively vague, allowing Ball's thought to encompass the disproportion not only of the machine gun's firing, but also of the entire military apparatus of which it is a figure, and the soldier-artist way of life upon which that apparatus depends. "Us," similarly, contains multitudes, particularly since the sentence's status as indirect discourse leaves us uncertain whether it is the "us" of Ball or of the narrator. It could mean the category of human beings, or the community of soldiers, or a private "us" of Ball and his rifle, or of Ball's body and his soul. Moreover, the "fragility" could be the fragility of each member of "us" taken individually, or of the collective to which "us" refers. Not only are we fragile beings, vulnerable to physical violence, but also our community is fragile, and the violence in which it is implicated, and which, as we saw when Ball first fired his rifle, served to bind it together, now threatens to undo it.

Immediately Ball offers a familiar emblem for the disproportion of "it": "It's difficult with the weight of the rifle" (183). The rifle's weight reminds the narrator of "the mariner's white oblation" (184), reprising the allusion to the mariner's crossbow when Ball fired the rifle in Part III. The next several pages contain several such echoes, arranged generally to reverse the order of the earlier passage, as Ball prepares to discard with heavy arms what in that earlier passage he had taken up with numb fingers. Only after invoking "us," for example, does Ball remember the words of the rifle instructor:

you men must really cultivate the habit of treating this weapon with the very greatest care and there should be a healthy rivalry among you—it should be a matter of very proper pride and

Marry it man! Marry it!  
(183)

It's easy to see that the rifle becomes here both pen-like, an instrument of artistic activity, and phallic, a locus for erotic interest. Less obviously significant is the emphasis on "healthy rivalry." We can easily understand this phrase, however, by referring it to Dai Greatcoat, whose boast seeks to overmaster that of Nobby Clark: Jones is concerned here with the possibility of non-fratricidal relations between soldiers, between artists. The instructor is speaking, not of one's own rifle only, but of how the rifle binds together the community of soldier-artists. The context allows the possibility but also emphasizes the disproportion, the excessive weight, that the rifle introduces.

The dilemma comes to a head as Ball struggles to crawl to safety and the narrator resumes the litany of "you." A series of statements, akin to those of Part III, though more variable in grammatical tense, emphasize the intimacy of Ball's relationship with his rifle, an intimacy first consummated in that earlier passage. But interrupting this litany, a new kind of statement emerges, an imperative:

You've known her hot and cold.  
You would choose her among many.  
You know her by her bias, and by her exact error at 300, and by the deep scar at the  
small, by the fair flaw in the grain, above the lower sling-swivel—  
But leave it under the oak.  
(184)

On the level of mimesis, we understand these words to be the narrator's representation of Ball's internal monologue, as he debates within himself about how to proceed. But the style is peculiar enough that we must hear ourselves in this "you." The book seems to address both us, and the author himself, in his capacity as self-observer. If the repetition of "you" seeks to place

us into a trance akin to that Ball falls into at the end of Part III, the imperative, set off by a dash, marks the moment when such a trance ceases to be morally licit. The enchantment of no-man's-land must be broken; the rifle must be put down.

It is no coincidence, then, that this last struggle with the weight of the rifle happens at the end of the book. Its function is valedictory, akin to Prospero's breaking of his staff. When Ball does finally set his rifle aside, it happens on the second to last page of the narrative: "At the gate of the wood you try a last adjustment, but slung so, it's an impediment, it's of detriment to your hopes, you had best be rid of it." The language here is morally fraught, and we cannot avoid understanding Ball's decision to be a moral one, or at least a prudential one, rather than a matter of pure *ars*. I do not mean to suggest that war is given up here because it is inherently evil. Jones certainly did not believe this, and, more to the point, neither does the book seem to show it.<sup>28</sup> Dai Greatcoat is not evil—but neither is he quite a human being. He more resembles the rifle which, in Ball's final estimation, is "a beautiful doll for us." If a human sought to live as Dai does, he might simply fade away, but more likely he would find himself in the predicament of the damned souls, who know what is good but have lost all hope of achieving it. So the author cannot linger with his book forever, but must "Leave it for a Cook's tourist to the Devastated Areas and crawl as far as you can and wait for the bearers" (186). Aesthetically, the thought of leaving it to the tourist is repulsive, but humanly speaking there is no alternative to such imperfection. Over these pages we see both Ball and Jones coming to terms with this fact.

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Dilworth reports Jones's response to the suggestion that his poem condemns war: *In Parenthesis* "is no more anti-war than it is pro-war. It merely accepts war as an unfortunate aspect of life experienced throughout history." *ibid.*, 54



I have compared the rifle to Prospero's staff in part because considering it in that light helps us better to understand Jones's allusions to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. The analogy Jones draws between the rifle and the albatross is strange in a number of ways. For one, the rifle seems more like the crossbow than the bird it shot. By conflating the two, Jones suggests that the deed and its punishment are interchangeable. For another, the rifle does not fall from Ball's neck, as the albatross does in Coleridge's poem; rather, he deliberately takes it off and leaves it behind. It is as if the repentance and the forgiveness are interchangeable. We noticed already in Chapter Three that Jones's version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* minimized the unconscious nature of the mariner's blessing, focusing instead on the moment of deliberation immediately before the albatross fell. Ball's struggle with his rifle moves even further in this direction, extending over several pages Ball's initial reluctance to part with the rifle and his eventual decision to let it go. It is as if Jones now interprets the poem even more forcefully: when the mariner says that, on his blessing the water snakes, the albatross fell from his neck, he meant, according to Jones, that, having blessed his brothers, he felt free to leave behind the implement with which he shot at them.

What in *In Parenthesis* corresponds to the blessing of the water snakes? Or, to ask the question without reference to Coleridge's poem: what allows Ball finally to leave behind his rifle, given how strong was his desire not to do so? This question has not, to my knowledge, been previously asked; the accepted reading seems to be that Ball's struggle is to avoid leaving behind the rifle, and that he ultimately fails in this struggle, giving up due to sheer physical exhaustion. It would be more accurate, however, to say that Ball struggles to leave the rifle behind, and that he can do so only after exhausting his aesthetic resistance to the idea. And

even this is not quite accurate, since “exhaustion” suggests that the resistant faculty has at least temporarily ceased to operate, when in fact Ball continues to rhapsodize over the rifle even after he has concluded he must part with it. Ball does not simply lose the strength to carry his rifle any further, and neither does he simply lose interest in carrying it further. Rather, he encounters something which will break the deadlock between his artistic desire to retain it and his prudential judgment that he should leave it behind.

Ball sees the fallen bodies of both English and German soldiers arrayed “as undiademmed princes” on the forest floor “under the changing light” of the mortar-illuminated night (184). The princes are undiademmed because their princely status has not been generally recognized. The princes are also, of course, dead, a state of even greater unconsciousness than that Ball himself inhabited when the vision ending Part III put him to sleep. Fully absorbed into the soldierly roles, they cannot crown themselves—but, in recognizing them, Ball can crown them in imagination, and does so. This vision thus directly opposes what Ball heard and imagined in his earlier, unconscious vision, when he saw the soldiers as rat-like, and envisioned the scavenging and decomposing of human flesh. Ball sees here that even dead soldiers are more princely than live rats, and responds accordingly. The earlier vision resulted from Ball’s first use of the rifle in combat, and lulled him to a sleep which prepared him from the dream-boast of Dai Greatcoat; the present vision of soldiers sleeping the sleep of the dead wakes Ball up, and leaves him finally willing to set the rifle aside.

## 2. “The Sea and the Mirror”: The Sword We Suffer is the Guarded Crown

In turning from Jones’s *In Parenthesis* to Auden’s “The Sea and the Mirror,” we seem to

be stepping into an entirely different poetic world. *In Parenthesis* was a narrative of the Great War, shaped by Jones's idiosyncratic sense of his Welsh, English, and Catholic inheritances; "The Sea and the Mirror" comments on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by offering a kind of closet-drama sequel to it, with many of its key concepts borrowed from Kierkegaard. *In Parenthesis* devotes itself primarily to sensual evocations of the world of the front lines, its stillness and its violence, with its relationship to human agency understood through the image of the rifle. "The Sea and the Mirror" is composed entirely of dramatic utterances, violence inhering only implicitly in the social relationships these utterances establish; Prospero does not even mention his staff, just his books. I don't want to minimize these differences. On the contrary, the starkness of the contrast between the two works is part of what makes it so surprising that they have so much in common: not only a concern for poetic fratricide, but also a schema for understanding it. "The Sea and the Mirror," too, structures its plot around the relations between an artist figure, a human brother entangled with him, and a human brother leaving him behind (even if, where *In Parenthesis* makes these last two into distinct moments in a single character's life, "The Sea and the Mirror" makes them into distinct characters).

This is not to say that "The Sea and the Mirror" shares *In Parenthesis*'s division into seven parts with emphasis falling on the middle of Part IV and the ends of Parts III and VII. The relationship between thought and form which we are considering is not nearly so rigid. "The Sea and the Mirror" has its own distinctive structure: it divides into a preface, three chapters, and a postscript. Each consists of a speech or multiple speeches delivered by one character in the meta-drama to another. The earliest-written portion of the work, the preface subtitled "(The Stage Manager to the Critics)," is a gnomic poem about the limits of the power

of art; the Postscript, “(Ariel to Caliban, echo by the Prompter),” written second, evokes the lyrical poignancy of those limits. The first two chapters, however, bracket the general question of art’s limitations, tracing instead the fortunes of the characters of *The Tempest* after the curtain drops. Chapter I, “Prospero to Ariel,” responds most directly to *The Tempest*, taking up where Shakespeare left off, with the artist-cum-magician wondering what life will be like without Ariel at his beck and call. In Chapter II, “The Supporting Cast (Sotto Voce),” we hear speeches less clearly located in time and space, and less dramatic than lyrical, ranging from the self-damnation of Antonio’s infernal *terza rima* to the communal celebration of Miranda’s pastoral villanelle. These two stand as bookends to the sequence, with Antonio, who comes to rival Prospero as a figure for the poet, allowed also a brief reply to every other character.

In between we see a veritable anthology of poetic forms, including, among others, Ferdinand’s love-sonnet, Stephano’s ballad to his stomach, and Sebastian’s conscience-stricken sestina. The self-conscious nature of these experiments partially prepares us for Chapter III, “Caliban to the Audience,” where Caliban speaks not about his island, but about the relation of art to life, allegorizing these as Ariel and Caliban. The Caliban chapter, like Jones’s preface, was the last portion of the book to be written, and functions as a commentary on the commentary, exploring the conclusions which various versions of “we” should draw. The careful fit of each verse form to its character, however, leaves us at a loss when we see the allegedly inarticulate Caliban taking up as many pages as the rest of the commentary put together, and speaking not in any verse-form at all but in a prolix prose style reminiscent of Henry James. Auden pushes the Jamesian style to the point of self-parody, but in a way which does not prevent readers from hearing in Caliban’s speech Auden’s own voice, a hallucination

Auden celebrated: “I’m extremely pleased and surprised to find that at least one reader feels that the section written in a pastiche of James is more me than the sections written in my own style.”<sup>29</sup>

If James’s style developed as a way to depict various participants in a social scene constructing one another through their interpretations, it is particularly suited for Caliban’s speech, which considers the reciprocally interpretive efforts of artist and audience.<sup>30</sup> Caliban begins by ventriloquizing the audience’s retort to the work it has just witnessed. This portion of Caliban’s speech is a helpful entry point into “The Sea and the Mirror,” identifying the concerns Auden expects us to bring to any commentary on *The Tempest*. One key worry involves Shakespeare’s alleged arrogance, his sense of authorial genius, of whose contingency (Caliban’s version of the) audience feels the need to remind him: “*we might very well not have been attending a production of yours this evening, had not some other and maybe—who can tell?—greater talent married a barmaid or turned religious and shy or gone down in a liner with all his manuscripts*” (33). (Caliban sets off the entire ventriloquization in italics.) Auden doubtless knew how Shakespeare’s success in some sense depended on Marlowe’s untimely death, but his list does not include “barfight,” an omission which generalizes the point: poetry is an inherently competitive enterprise.

The audience’s emphasis on rivalry is not arbitrary. It responds directly to the play they have just purportedly seen, *The Tempest*, a work in large part about two sets of rival brothers and one of these brothers’ magical-poetic attempt to reconcile all four. The audience sees that

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<sup>29</sup> Letter to Theodore Spencer, ?24 March 1944, quoted in Kirsch, “Introduction” xxxii.

<sup>30</sup> On the philosophical implications of James’s style I have found helpful Pippin, *Henry James and the Modern Moral Life*.

Prospero purports to be against fraternal violence, but is suspicious of how he means to oppose it: “*We want no Ariel here, breaking down our picket fences in the name of fraternity, seducing our wives in the name of romance, and robbing us of our sacred pecuniary deposits in the name of justice*” (35). Ariel, which is to say, poetry, exempts himself from his own admonitions toward fraternity, romance, justice, thus perpetuating the evils he attempts to cure. Caliban’s hyperbole does ironize the audience’s worries—picket fences and pecuniary deposits are both far from sacred to Auden. On the whole, however, Caliban agrees with the audience regarding poetry’s innate propensity toward tyrannical violence. Describing in the second person (in his own voice) the maturation of the would-be poet, Caliban proclaims: “you are rapidly finding out the right orders to give—who should be killed in the hunting accident [...]” (36). Poetry’s violence is worth worrying about, not because the status quo is without its own violence, but because attempting to construct an aesthetically pleasing alternative to the status quo shapes both author and audience into the kind of people who issue such orders.

If the opening of Auden-as-Caliban’s prose address depicts “you,” the audience, indicting the author, that indictment is prompted by Prospero’s dramatic monologue, which uses “I” 50 times in 164 lines of syllabic verse alternating 14 and 11 syllables, making the word one out of every 41 syllables (coincidentally the same ratio as in Dai’s boast). Along the way, this figural artist comes to seem calculated and insincere, such that we see through his words to the self-deceiving personality beneath them. He believes that he is being honest with himself for the first time—“At last I can really believe I will die”—but in fact the nature of his speech precludes any such honesty. Prospero is addressing Ariel moments after he freed that spirit at the end of *The Tempest*: “Stay with me, Ariel, while I pack, and with your first free act | Delight

my leaving” (5). Somewhat like King Lear, Prospero tries to compel the spirit to remain his servant in spirit, if not in letter, hoping to give up his art while at the same time retaining its power. We are not surprised, then, when this impossible act of self-denial becomes an occasion for ironic self-apotheosis: “I am that I am, your late and lonely master” (6). Prospero does not know how to be anything other than a fallen divinity.

We cannot fully understand Prospero’s speech, however, unless we admit that his self-deception does not prevent him from offering an accurate self-diagnosis. In other words, the difference between Auden’s and Prospero’s “I” does not stem from Prospero’s failure to recognize something about his situation. He is not Herod, bemoaning his own misery while engaging in mass murder, but rather is the artist who sees, through his art, art’s limitations, and yet for all that acknowledgement cannot be other than an artist. Prospero knows, above all, that art begins in a childish reaction against “the gross insult of being a mere one among many,” but matures into “the power to enchant | That comes from disillusion” (6). I disagree here with Matthew Mutter, who finds in these latter lines Prospero’s avowal of the hieratic poetry Auden detested.<sup>31</sup> Mutter offers a persuasive general account of Auden’s anti-magical poetics, but not of Prospero’s speech. Mutter needs us to hear “disillusion” in a Weberian vein, such that Prospero’s power over others comes from his seeing through to the mechanistic behind the apparently animated world. But the next several lines of Prospero’s speech make clear that he has a different illusion in mind, the illusion that art can make anything happen: “we have only to learn to sit still and give no orders, | To make you offer us your echo and your mirror; | We have only to believe you, then you dare not lie; | To ask for nothing [...]” (6). The paradox

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<sup>31</sup> Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 167.

Prospero has in mind concerns the impossibility of deriving grace from nature: art can enchant us only when we cease believing that we can use it to enchant ourselves.

Not only does Prospero correctly appraise art's limits, he also recognizes its inherent dangers. Remarkably, even his lyric impulse submits to this moral censor, though it adopts a somewhat ironic tone in doing so. We encounter that impulse in the three songs which divide Prospero's speech into three subsections. The first song names three temptations brought about by too long a look in the mirror of art. Art's evocation of natural beauty can take on "a pornographic flavour"; its revelations about ourselves and our loves can make "my hot heart" jealous that "its treasure loves another" (7); and its portrayal of "the price of faith and honour" can make moral virtue seem unappealing (8). This odd catalog makes more sense if we remember who is compiling it. The first and third temptations, to sensuality and cowardice, refer to the young duke Prospero, who abandoned his realm for his books, and whose scientific knowledge could be likened to pulling back nature's decorous veil. The temptation to jealousy has no obvious connection to Prospero's life, though it does to Auden's own, in the form of the infidelity of Auden's lover Chester Kallman. A link to Prospero enters the picture, however, with the image used for the proper response to rebuffed passion: "Pure scholarship in Where and When, | How Often and With Whom, | Is not for Passion that must play | The Jolly Elder Brother" (7). Even if Prospero was not in any clear sense jealous of his younger brother Antonio, Auden hints here that he lacked in fraternal charity, and did so because of the knowledge of others his magic gave him. We remember here that the plot of *The Tempest* is taken up with Prospero's attempts magically to manipulate his enemies, and especially his brother, into repentance.



By Auden's own lights, then, Prospero is not in error about the nature of his art. Prospero shares Auden's belief that poetry makes nothing happen, and that its power comes from its uselessness to satisfy any human need. Indeed, Prospero's description of the poem as echo and mirror is a succinct summary of Caliban's later, more convoluted account. It is not of Prospero's theory of art that the poem encourages us to be suspicious, but rather of the use to which he would put that theory. Prospero believes that his knowledge of art's limits will allow him in some sense to exceed them while remaining himself. His first lyric goes on to reveal his true desire, which is not so much to give up his magic as to gain the freedom to take it up and put it down as he sees fit: "Hold up your mirror, boy, to do | Your vulgar friends this favor: | One peep, though, will be quite enough" (7). But Ariel cannot be put back into the bottle, not, at least, on the initiative of Prospero's own words, because those words enter the world under the sign of poetry.

Prospero's problem lies not in what he thinks, but in what he does and will not stop doing, namely, talk to Ariel. There is, of course, no one else for Prospero to talk to. As a figure for the artist, he cannot do anything except artistically, which is to say with Ariel's assistance. "Can I learn to suffer | Without saying something ironic or funny | On suffering?" (11) Nothing Prospero *says* (and especially not anything he says to Ariel!) can give us reason to answer this question in the affirmative. The third and last of his speeches therefore comes to no final conclusion, but ends abruptly: "I see you starting to fidget. I forgot. To you | That doesn't matter. My dear, here comes Gonzalo." Even after such an interruption, he cannot refrain from beginning his final lyric with an invocation: "Sing, Ariel, sing" (11). This failure is not quite hypocritical, but it does reveal the incompleteness of Prospero's self-conversion. The three

lyrics do not subvert the three monologues with which they interweave, but where the monologues speak alternately autobiographically and theoretically, the lyrics speak out of desire. In long lines, Prospero describes what he has seen of Ariel and the conclusions he has drawn; in short rhymes, he reveals what he will continue to hope from the spirit, no matter what he says: “sing | To man, meaning me, | As now, meaning always, | In love or out, | Whatever that mean” (12). The powerful song will persist within Prospero no matter how unmusical he renders his speech—and no matter how often he avows this limitation.

With poetry come the vices of poetry. Prospero believes that he has put sensuality and cowardice behind him, although we might doubt him on these points, since the life he imagines for himself is one of languid indolence. More importantly, for our purposes, Prospero persists in playing playwright to all the other characters of “The Sea and the Mirror,” using his poetic knowledge of human nature to predict the futures in store for them:

Alonso’s heaviness  
Is lost; and weak Sebastian will be patient  
In future with his slothful conscience—after all, it pays;  
Stephano is contracted to his belly, a minor  
But a prosperous kingdom; stale Trinculo receives,  
Gratis, a whole fresh repertoire of stories, and  
Our younger generation its independent joy.  
(9)

These quips are not un insightful, and in fact they approximate Auden’s own reading of *The Tempest*, as expressed in his 1946–47 lectures on Shakespeare.<sup>32</sup> They fail, however, to predict the speeches of any of the characters of “The Sea and the Mirror,” and fail particularly badly in two instances. The first is that of Sebastian, whom Prospero assumes to have acted on

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<sup>32</sup> Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, 301–4.

mercenary motives, but whose later speech reveals a deeply spiritual sense of contrition and forgiveness. By placing such trust in his own poetic insight, Prospero erases the free will of his fellow human beings. Worse, Prospero's trust in his own knowledge ensures that even now he cannot fulfill his fraternal obligations to Antonio, the other case we will consider: "All by myself I tempted Antonio into treason; | However that could be cleared up; both of us know | That both were in the wrong, and neither need be sorry" (8). By denying that mutual understanding can substitute for mutual forgiveness, Prospero pretends to respect his brother's freedom, but in fact indulges his own hardened heart.

Prospero's "knowledge" that knowledge is an adequate replacement for his brother's refused forgiveness is of a piece with Prospero's refusal to acknowledge the contrition of the brother who achieves it. Much of the plot of "The Sea and the Mirror" lies in the distance between, on the one hand, these misguided characterizations in Prospero's Chapter I monologue, and, on the other, the realities unveiled in Chapter II's soliloquys. My focus in what follows will be on this distance, particularly regarding the play's two fratricidal characters. Because Sebastian's ode to conscience comes third from the end while Antonio's rebuke to Prospero stands at the chapter's beginning, I will begin with the latter.

Antonio's aim is not so much to prove false Prospero's evaluation of their fraternal relations as to show what each knowing he was wrong and neither being sorry actually looks like. The resulting portrait, in Dantean *terza rima*, is hellish above all in how it shows Antonio's damnation to damn Prospero as well. Antonio begins by sardonically praising the success of Prospero's stage management: "Yes, Brother Prospero, your grouping could | Not be more effective" (13). Antonio recognizes here what we too have seen in Prospero's speeches to Ariel,

namely, that Prospero has imagined himself a beneficent artisan, and in doing so has rendered the characters he manipulates less than fully free. They are reduced to “your loyal subjects all, grateful enough | To know their place and believe what you say” (13). This peace is not true peace, but only the victory of the poetic will over the weak minds of the other cast members. Such a peace erupts back into violence as soon as it again encounters opposition:

Antonio, sweet brother, has to laugh.  
How easy you have made it to refuse  
Peace to your greatness! Break your wand in half,  
  
The fragments will join; burn your books or lose  
Then in the sea, they will soon reappear,  
Not even damaged; as long as I choose  
  
To wear my fashion, whatever you wear  
Is a magic robe; while I stand outside  
Your circle, the will to charm is still there.  
(14)

Antonio’s decision to become an emblem of pure defiance may be monstrous, but in the face of Prospero’s self-duplicity it is undeniably successful in its aims. Prospero has staked his happiness on Antonio’s reasonableness, his willingness to forget if not forgive. Antonio’s refusal traps Prospero in the position of the older brother pleading with the immature younger one to grow up:

As I exist, so you shall be denied,  
Forced to remain our melancholy mentor,  
The grown-up man, the adult in his pride,  
  
Never have time to curl up at the center  
Time turns on when completely reconciled,  
Never become and therefore never enter  
The green occluded pasture as a child.  
(14)

The phrase “melancholy mentor” here recalls Prospero’s “late and lonely master,” as if to

suggest that Prospero's loneliness is not tragic but mere bad humor. The language about time's reconciliation, too, parodies *Four Quartets*, as if Antonio is throwing in Prospero's face his Eliot-like sententious discourse about the limits of poetry. Antonio is not, that is to say, claiming that Prospero has made a mistake in his reasoning; rather, Prospero has failed properly to capture the mood in which his conclusions should leave him. Antonio has merely ratified with a vengeance what Prospero imagined the relationship between them now to be.

Something similar may be said of Prospero's remarks on Sebastian quoted above, that he "will be patient | in future with his slothful conscience—after all, it pays." Sebastian's sestina meditates on the question of what, if anything, his conscience has won him. But the prize he has in mind is quite different from that Prospero seems to imagine: neither a materialistic avarice, nor a self-contented adulthood, but only a reprieve from fratricidal violence. Where Antonio at the end of his boast spoke of a single child, Sebastian in the sixth stanza of his confession speaks of children:

Children are playing, brothers are alive,  
And not a heart or stomach asks for proof  
That all this dearness is no lover's dream;  
Just Now is what it might be every day  
(24)

Children playing demonstrates that to be "alive," one of the sestina's keywords, has overcome the death-driven desire for "proof." Sebastian thus cannot accept Prospero's equation of goodness with maturation into virtue. He imagines it, instead, as waking up into forgiveness. Sebastian's obsession with the antithesis of "dream" and "day" derives from Shakespeare's play, where Sebastian describes as "a sleepy language" Antonio's plan to murder Alonso and make

Sebastian king of Naples.<sup>33</sup> In Shakespeare dreams and poetry are closely aligned, and to call the wicked plan a dream is to give it an aesthetic aura. For Auden, this makes it an allusion to the possibility of poetic fratricide. Auden's Sebastian rejoices that the fratricide was *merely* poetic, a dream without practical effect.

Sebastian asserts the inefficacy of the dream beginning in his first stanza, in a line reminiscent of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats": "it is day; | Nothing has happened; we are still alive" (23). As with the earlier memorial, of course, nothing happening is only the beginning. The lesson for the poet is what happens next, over the remaining five stanzas of the sestina and the final envoi. In "In Memory" this involves tracing the course of water from the spring to the rivermouth. In a sestina, however, the same six words propagate down the ragged right-hand margin in various permutations, and no seventh word can be allowed to recur in a way which would draw attention away from the original six. How, then, can the course of the poem lead to novel territory? Auden's sestinas often take this apparent impossibility as their theme<sup>34</sup>: "Paysage Moralisé" (1933), for example, begins with "harvests rotting in the valleys" and ends wondering if "water | would rush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys," doing away with a world which even before the poem began had been old and rotten.<sup>35</sup> Sebastian's meditation differs slightly from this paradigm in that a transformation has already in a sense occurred at the beginning of the poem—only it was a transformation from action into inaction. The sestina's task is to show how this inaction still makes a difference.

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<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest* II.i.

<sup>34</sup> In this, Auden's contrast in intriguing ways with more recent sestinas, as Steph Burt has observed (Burt, "Sestina! Or, the Fate of the Idea of Form").

<sup>35</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 119–20.

It's worth noting that even the sestina form has been twisted to this new purpose. The standard permutation of line endings has been altered such that what should be stanza three precedes stanza two, and stanza six precedes stanza five. We go two steps forward, then one step back, and our progress is so imperceptible that, though the beginning and end of the poem differ profoundly, it is not obvious that slightly reordering the stanzas would much alter the poem's meaning. This entrancingly opaque allegory invites paraphrase without allowing for any definite interpretation. We should not respond by tendentiously rewriting the "argument" in syllogistic form, and neither should we seek to register the tonal shifts in the "speaker's" sibylline voice. Our best approach will be to track how the six keywords, each a traditional and traditionally polyvalent poetic symbol, recombine as if of their own accord as the poem progresses. As already suggested, two of these words, "dream" and "day," are placed in opposition to one another throughout, stressing over and over the escape from one into the other. What changes is our sense of how the remaining four terms relate to this escape. "Proof" and "alive," and "sword" and "crown," bear the burden of the sestina's poetic development.

Sebastian's first stanza places the poem in line with the broader theme of "The Sea and the Mirror," the relationship between moral responsibility and poetic achievement. It suggests that communal life and theoretical proof have been secured through the loss of immoral beauty:

My rioters all disappear, my dream  
Where Prudence flirted with a naked sword,  
Securely vicious, crumbles; it is day;  
Nothing has happened; we are all alive:  
I am Sebastian, wicked still, my proof  
Of mercy that I wake without a crown.

(23)

The sword resides within the private, first-person-singular dream, an erotic implement tempting virtue toward vice. The crown resides there also, its absence from the day a sign that the temptation has failed. Yet it has left Sebastian “wicked still,” and isolated from the plural pronoun of “we are all alive” into the same kind of self-predication characteristic of Prospero and Antonio. But if Sebastian’s “wicked still” precludes the possibility that he has been awakened into virtue, still it suggests a self-recognition exceeding that of Prospero’s “late and lonely master” or Antonio’s “alone.” At the very least, Andrew Hass’s assessment, on the basis of this line, that Sebastian “does not repent, and certainly does not forgive,”<sup>36</sup> is premature. The crucial contrast is that of “wicked still” with “securely vicious”: Sebastian’s waking wickedness may persist, but it is not incorrigible, and his acknowledgement of it is not rebellion but Christian humility.

Hass is right, however, that repentance and forgiveness are not the point—not because Sebastian does not achieve them, but because he has already accepted mercy in the very first stanza. His challenge is not to accept mercy, but to understand its effect, what possibilities it opens up for a change in self-understanding. Hence his language is not only ethical but also epistemological: not just “proof,” but “believed,” “pretended,” “persuaded,” “honesty,” “think,” “lie,” “unawares,” “error.” In the first stanza mercy means the absence of sword and crown. In the fifth, it begins to mean something different:

O blessed be bleak Exposure on whose sword,  
Caught unawares, we prick ourselves alive!  
Shake Failure’s bruising fist! Who else would crown  
Abominable error with a proof?  
(23)

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<sup>36</sup> Hass, *Auden’s O*, 140.



Sebastian's high language communicates the child's thought that if you feel pain when someone pinches you, you know you're not dreaming. The sword no longer opposes life, but proves it, and the proof itself constitutes a crown rather than the lack of one. But this can happen only because the sword now rests not in the hands of Sebastian's allegorical Prudence, but in those of his Exposure, or, rather, the general exposure "we" encounter unawares.

The next stanza reaffirms that sword and crown can have no place in our own hands and on our own heads: "Right Here is absolute and needs no crown, | Ermine or trumpets, protocol or sword." We can enter the place where "Children are playing, brothers are alive," only when our dreamed-of sword has been replaced by the sword of exposed truth, and when our dreamed-of crown has been replaced by the crown of the *felix culpa*. By the time we reach the envoi, this submission to the reality principle has blossomed into a vision of deification:

In dream all sins are easy, but by day  
It is defeat gives proof we are alive;  
The sword we suffer is the guarded crown.

(23)

Packing into three lines all six of the sestina's keywords, the envoi gives the opposite impression to that of Prospero's abrupt departure from Ariel: Sebastian *must* cease speaking here, for he has reached a definite conclusion, albeit a paradoxical one. The difference between these lines and those with which the sestina opened are small, but weighty. Defeat no longer proves mercy, but something more basic, life itself—and not Sebastian's private life, but all of our lives. The sword, which at first had aimed to seize the crown, has now become the crown—but a different sword, and a different crown, than Sebastian contemplated when the poem began. Then, the sword was naked, erotically tempting; now, the crown is guarded, which is to

say, careful, wary of succumbing to that temptation, the opposite of being languidly at ease.

“Guarded” can aptly describe not only of Sebastian’s moral crowning, but also of his sestina’s enigmatic style, which seems calculated to preserve his insight into the nature of mercy from the corruption of poetic dreaming. Sebastian has spent his sestina discovering a crown which is not won through the sword of poetry, but rather secured through our errant, child-like interactions with one another. Antonio responds by insisting once more on the opposite of a guarded poetics, a poetics of violence. Antonio seeks to win the aesthetic crown which poetic use of swords can achieve, through “*The dream in which Antonio | Fights the white bull alone.*” The object of Antonio’s poetic violence, as he imagines it, is not a human person but a bull, a dumb animal, though one with an uncanny, poetic coloring. The bull in a bullfight exists in order to be led theatrically about and then ultimately dispatched, much as the other members of the cast have, according to Antonio’s *terza rima* monologue, been manipulated and dismissed.

Antonio mocks Prospero for this dismissal but also participates in it. The lines just quoted about Antonio fighting the white bull come, not from his *terza rima* soliloquy, but from his italicized retort to Sebastian, one of ten such retorts he makes, corresponding to the ten speakers in Chapter II, including himself. Each of these shares the same five-line structure, with slight variations, the most important being an additional line in the final one, which closes out the chapter. The individual phrases that fill in the formula matter, but in the end what matters more is the formula itself:

*One {NOUN} is {ADJECTIVE}, Prospero  
My {PROPERTY} is my own;  
{EPITHET} {NAME} does not know*

*The {NOUN} {ADVERB} Antonio  
{VERB PHRASE} alone.*

The third line always names the cast member to whom Antonio responds, save for the first, responding to Antonio's own soliloquy, in which Antonio claims, in a line again echoing Prospero's self-description, that "*Your [Prospero's] need to love shall never know | Me: I am I, Antonio, | By choice myself alone*" (14). Antonio thus asserts a deficit of knowledge on the part of every character besides himself.

For Michael Wood, this arrogation makes Antonio into the true, if unintended, hero of the book: "'The Sea and the Mirror' thinks back against Auden's plans for it because Antonio doesn't have to 'forgive forgiveness'. It is enough that he knows more about the world than any of the forgivers, and more about paradise than any of the aspiring residents."<sup>37</sup> With this suggestion, however, Wood's otherwise insightful defense of Prospero's brother goes too far. Wood has not noticed that Antonio does not have even the opportunity to 'forgive forgiveness': Prospero has not forgiven him, but merely proclaimed that it is time to move on. Antonio thinking back against Prospero would, indeed, seem to be Auden's intent, insofar as we can judge it from his placing the two brothers to span the divide of Chapter I from Chapter II. Further, we can conclude, from what we saw in Chapter I, that we cannot know what would happen if Prospero were to forgive Antonio. Prospero seems incapable of forgiving one who throws forgiveness back in his face, in the same way that he is incapable of keeping silent confronted with the new freedom of his servant Ariel. Auden's Prospero *is* his impulse to charm, manipulate, dominate, as well as that impulse's movement toward self-mastery.

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<sup>37</sup> Wood, "Shakespeare's Auden," 187.

So what of Wood's suggestion that Antonio knows more about the world than any of its forgivers? Antonio does imply that he sees through the forgiveness of each of the other speakers, who "will never know" what Antonio knows in his aloneness. But we might well doubt the veracity of Antonio's claim. It is enlightening to place Wood's reading next to that Edward Mendelson offers in his Auden biography: "Antonio is another poor cheated Mephistopheles who brings about exactly what he thinks he is preventing, for it is his recurring refrain that links the speeches of all the others and draws the circle that Miranda delights in."<sup>38</sup> Mendelson is right, to be sure, that Antonio's responses achieve what Miranda wishes, the integration of all the inhabitants of Chapter II "as children in a circle dancing" (26). I take Wood's point, however, to be that this is not exactly what Antonio hopes to prevent. Rather, in each of his replies, Antonio usurps the place of the previous speaker and refuses Prospero's forgiveness on their behalf. In doing so, however, he does not, contra Wood, really prove that he knows more. Nor, contra Mendelson, does he necessarily know less. He establishes merely that each of the speakers retains the power to refuse Prospero's forgiveness, this being just what the poetically domineering Prospero cannot abide. Every other character *could have been* Antonio.

Antonio's responses demonstrate, not his knowledge, but his attitude toward poetic closure. Whereas Prospero could not conclude his address to Ariel other than by breaking off, Antonio contains within himself an overabundance of conclusions—one for every member of the supporting cast. We must imagine Chapter II to involve Prospero and Antonio standing apart, duelling stage managers, overhearing the *sotto voce* soliloquys of the various characters,

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<sup>38</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 545.

on each of which Antonio offers a malicious gloss for Prospero's benefit: "*Your all is partial, Prospero,*" "*One bed is empty, Prospero,*" "*One glass is untouched, Prospero,*" "*One tongue is silent, Prospero,*" "*One act is censored, Prospero,*" "*One crown is lacking, Prospero,*" "*One gaze points elsewhere, Prospero,*" "*One face cries nothing, Prospero,*" "*One note is jarring, Prospero,*" "*One link is missing, Prospero.*" The one missing is Antonio, but the one who misses him is Prospero, and it is the latter who is more truly excluded from the circle, not even allowed into the pages of Chapter II. Prospero cannot make his peace with the fact that the various characters are motivated by loves unrelated to Prospero's own magic—none of them mentions Prospero or even so much as alludes to Miranda's father or Ferdinand's future father-in-law, each speaking instead to their particular love-object (Ferdinand to Miranda, Stephano to his belly, Alonso to his son, *et cetera*). Antonio does not create, but only reveals his brother's self-exclusion, a result of Prospero's insistence on his own adulthood.

The full significance of Prospero's exclusion becomes clear only in Antonio's final malignant coda, his six-line response to Miranda's villanelle:

*One link is missing, Prospero,  
 My magic is my own;  
 Happy Miranda does not know  
 The figure that Antonio,  
 The Only One, Creation's O  
 Dances for Death alone.*  
 (26)

Antonio's word "*magic*" is a surprising one, given the typical structure of Antonio's rejoinders. These usually assert as Antonio's own some attribute associated with the preceding speaker—Alonso's crown, Sebastian's conscience, Trinculo's humor. Miranda does allude to various fairy-tale transformations, but in "The Sea and the Mirror," as in *The Tempest* itself, magic is

not Miranda's but Prospero's. Antonio spends the next four lines suggesting that Prospero and Antonio have more in common with one another than either does with Miranda.

Antonio does so in part through the figure of capital-D "*Death*," to whom he pledges a kind of loyalty. We know nothing more of this Death except the ambiguous implication of Antonio's final word "*alone*," which may apply to Antonio, such that he dances alone, or to Death, who alone observes him. The latter possibility aligns Death with lonely Prospero, whom we already know to make up the audience of Antonio's asides. Death, it seems, is the title by which Antonio names his brother. Antonio names himself the empty climax of poetic creation, arrived at for the sake of Prospero's death drive. To take seriously Antonio's figuring of Prospero as Death, and himself as Death's devotee, does not involve judging Prospero Antonio's equal or inferior morally speaking—though one can certainly picture a Baudelaire preferring the straightforwardly evil Antonio to his self-manipulating, self-abnegating brother. The point, rather, is to see that the Prospero of "The Sea and the Mirror" is less a character than a principle playing itself out, and that Antonio is the character (for Chapter II does contain characters, of a sort) who most closely aligns himself with that principle, even while he seeks to oppose it. Antonio stands at the opening of Chapter II defying Prospero's magic; at the end of the chapter, we realize that the defiance itself was a kind of magic, dependent all along on the magic it defied.

Miranda, in contrast—for Auden as much as for Shakespeare—is defined not by magic but by perception. She sees the connection between her and her loved one as clearly "As the poor and sad are real to the good king" (25). I cannot help but think that Auden intends here a pun, merging the "real" of *res* with that of *regalis*: the monarch understands "the poor and sad"

to be not only thingly, but also kingly. By recognizing the regality of even the marginalized, Miranda points toward an image of invisible humanity reminiscent of the “undiademed princes” of *In Parenthesis* Part VII. And as the princely vision in that poem made it possible for John Ball prudently to lay down his rifle, so Miranda’s vision, by standing at the opposite end from Antonio of Chapter II, makes it possible for Sebastian to suffer the sword and crown of his stricken conscience.

The end of art, for Auden and Jones alike, involves pain, but not the pain of failure so much as the pain of radiance. If Sebastian’s guarded crown is ultimately a Shakespearean image, so too are Jones’s undiademed princes, though in a more roundabout way. Jones introduces princedom in the closing pages of his preface, when he asks (without offering any answer) whether modern poetry can ever achieve such a coronation:

Some of us ask ourselves if Mr. X adjusting his box-respirator can be equated with what the poet envisioned, in

“I saw young Harry with his beaver on.” (xiv)

This line comes from *Henry IV, pt. 1*, and more specifically from a speech singing the praises of Prince Hal to an unappreciative Hotspur<sup>39</sup>:

I saw young Harry with his beaver on,  
His cuisses on his thighs, gallantly armed  
Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury  
And vaulted with such ease into his seat  
As if an angel dropped down from the clouds,  
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus  
And witch the world with noble horsemanship.

To which Hotspur replies: “No more, no more!”<sup>40</sup> He refuses to continue contemplating Prince

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<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1* IV.i.104-110.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* IV.i.111.

Hal's glory because that glory is set on destroying him. But he does not cut it off at the beginning, or refuse to believe it; he desires only that the recounting cease. Hal's glory is, after all, in a strange way Hotspur's own. As Shakespeare repeatedly reminds us, these poetic brothers share a Christian name.

### 3. Conclusion: Poetry and Personality

As with my earlier comparison of the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations with "For the Time Being," my argument in this chapter has centered on a series of structural parallels between two works. While these parallels are better understood through words than through diagrams, it is nevertheless helpful to set side by side each work's table of contents:

<i>IN PARENTHESIS</i>	"THE SEA AND THE MIRROR"
Preface	Preface (The Stage Manager to the Critics)
Parts I, II, III (John Ball approaches the front)	Chapter I: Prospero to Ariel
Part IV (John Ball in the trenches; Dai Greatcoat's boast)	Chapter II: The Supporting Cast (sotto voce) (including Antonio, Sebastian, Miranda)
Parts V, VI, VII (John Ball approaches the battle; The Queen of the Woods; John Ball abandons the rifle)	Chapter III: Caliban to the Audience
Endnotes	Postscript (Ariel to the Prompter)

*Table 4: Comparison of In Parenthesis and "The Sea and the Mirror"*

We cannot simply draw horizontal lines across this table and call the two sides equal. It would be more accurate to say that Auden's approach folds Jones's in half, or that Jones's unfolds Auden's (I am not suggesting that either approach takes precedence). The center of Jones's narrative, Dai's boast in Part IV, has its parallel in Prospero's farewell at the beginning of



Auden's drama. Jones's parallel to Auden's variegated Chapter II is the narrative itself, especially the passages at the ends of Parts III and VII. Finally—in a parallel we will consider in more detail in the next chapter—Auden's Chapter III, Caliban's address to the audience, corresponds to Jones's authorial preface and endnotes.

The dynamic underlying both of these structures we can summarize as follows. The fratricidal danger of poetry originates in the competition Jones describes as taking place between art and prudence, Auden, between wish and conscience. The former—the artist's "I," Dai Greatcoat and Prospero—cannot of its own accord recognize the authority of the latter—the artist's "you," John Ball and Antonio and Sebastian. Unable to bring itself to an end, poetry leaves no room for anything or anyone besides itself. The human being must step in and insist on the artwork's finitude. It can do so, however, only when it catches a glimpse of the royalty of the warring brothers—the "undiademed princes," "the poor and sad" made "real"—which is to say, a glimpse of the infinite value of the human person. This vision constitutes, for both Jones's *In Parenthesis* and Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror," both the solution to poetic fratricide and the end of poetry.

## CHAPTER 5: THE PEACE OF POETIC INTERPRETATION

This chapter takes up where the previous one left off, with the visions of royalty that appear at the end of David Jones's *In Parenthesis* and midway through W. H. Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror." These visions in some sense precipitate the reconciliation of impersonal artist with moral agent: John Ball does not lay down his rifle until he sees the "undiademed princes"<sup>1</sup>; Antonio's enchantments are not overcome until "the poor and sad are real to the good king."<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to let these images stand as self-explanatory, as if it were enough to say that properly fraternal poetry were in its essence a quest to arrive at such recognitions of intrinsic value. As I will argue, however, neither Jones nor Auden rests content at this point, instead introducing a further complication.

The complication involves the origin of these half-visible crowns. John Ball's vision of the "undiademed princes" goes together with the Queen of the Woods; similarly, "the poor and sad are real to the good king" because Miranda sings about them in her villanelle. The climactic importance of the Queen and of Miranda pose difficulties, and not only because, seen from afar, they can seem mere clichés, vague appeals to the romantic Eternal Feminine (though prior critics have argued, I think convincingly, that Jones's and Auden's understanding of sex and gender tended to be considerably more sophisticated than this would suggest<sup>3</sup>). What makes these women necessary to the poetic logic, such that these works cannot come to a close without representing them?

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 184. Citations henceforth parenthetical by page number.

<sup>2</sup> Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, 25. Citations henceforth parenthetical by page number.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Staudt, *At the Turn of A Civilization* and Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*.

We can, I believe, best understand this question with a thought borrowed from Immanuel Kant's aesthetic philosophy. In an infamous passage from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant suggests that art somehow centers on a vision of the human person: "This man is, then, alone of all objects in the world, susceptible of an Ideal of beauty; as it is only humanity in his person, as an intelligence, that is susceptible of the Ideal of perfection." At the same time, however, this vision constitutes the end of 'pure' art: "a judgement in accordance with an Ideal of beauty is not a mere judgement of taste."<sup>4</sup> Unless it is to leave meaning behind, poetry cannot be a 'pure' art, but when it approaches the Ideal of beauty, pictured by both Jones and Auden in terms of these half-visible crowns, it comes up against the intrinsic limitations of aesthetic experience. For there do not exist poetic images which cannot be misinterpreted, and there always exist multiple coherent and incompatible theories of poetic interpretation. This is, we might say, the helplessness of poetry, its inability to mean clearly. I would suggest that the women in these books are meant to picture this helplessness and help us to understand it.

Each of the first two sections of this chapter will take an extended look at one of our two books, first *In Parenthesis*, second "The Sea and the Mirror." We will begin by looking closely at the passage in which the judging woman appears, to see how she figures the helplessness of poetry. We will then turn to the author's theoretical reflections on that figure, found in Jones's preface and Auden's Caliban speech, respectively, to see how they relate this helplessness to the recursive dynamics of poetic interpretation. For both Jones and Auden, the key fact about poetic interpretation is that it involves a recursion which embeds the poet's life

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, sec. 17.

within the work, and the work within the lives of the readers, who themselves possess the poetic capacity. This recursion makes both possible and difficult the recognition of humanity's hidden regality at which poetry ought to aim. A closing section will recapitulate the theory of poetry I have been attributing to Jones and Auden in this and the previous chapter, and suggest some points of resemblance between it and other relevant poetic theories.

### 1. *In Parenthesis*: Anyone Who Would Play Welsh Queen

When I associate John Ball's vision of the undiademmed princes with the lyric high point of *In Parenthesis* that is the ceremony of the Queen of the Woods, I do not mean that Ball himself sees the Queen, let alone that the Queen exists only in his imagination. Much of the passage's beauty lies in how objectively the narrator presents it—the reader is not prompted to imagine the uncanny ceremony, but rather sees it as clearly as one sees anything in the shifting light at the end of Part VII. After a few lines describing Ball's perception of the fallen soldiers, a section break leads immediately into the Queen's advent:

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 gentle-men. 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 [...]  
(185)

This floral scene may have been inspired by a contingent conjunction of fallen soldiers and spring flowers that Jones witnessed in Mametz Wood in 1916, but within the pages of *In*

*Parenthesis* the flowers have been particularly chosen by the mysterious Queen. Her actions show us the meaning of what Ball has already seen—and, whether or not Ball sees her, he discerns her meaning correctly. Ball is absent from her procession because, being alive, he can carry it within him. Dai, in contrast, simply cannot be found: “Dai Greatcoat, she can’t find him anywhere—she calls both high and low, she had a very special one for him” (186). It’s worth remembering here the discussion of Dai in the previous chapter: the old soldier is defined as the one who “simply fades away,” leaving no dead body behind. To appreciate the princely dignity of each fallen soldier lies beyond Dai’s capacities, and as soon as Ball sees them as hidden princes he becomes able to leave the rifle, Dai’s principal instrument, behind.

That the Queen attaches “special” importance to the absent Dai calls attention to the structural relationship between the two figures. The Queen’s visit relates to Ball’s wounded struggling at the end of Part VII much as Dai’s boast in Part IV relates to Ball’s standing watch at the end of Part III. As Dai’s boast suggests the inner meaning of the soldier-artist form of life, so the Queen both results from and stands outside of that meaning, which cannot encompass it. Dilworth is on the right track, then, when he writes that “The Queen of the Woods tends to unbalance the spatial equilibrium of knowledge, to go beyond it, but Dai Greatcoat refuses to submit to her attraction.”<sup>5</sup> But he is not quite right. First, because Dai does not refuse to submit, but rather is unable to hear her call; he has not fled the field of battle, but rather, the battle ended, he has simply vanished. Second, because the knowledge in question must be specified: it is the knowledge of artistic form. Because Dai is incapable of any but

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<sup>5</sup> Dilworth, *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*, 148.

artistic reasoning, he cannot form moral judgments of the sort that would lead him to recognize the secret princes.

The contrast between Dai and the Queen might seem to resemble one we encountered in Chapter Three, the diptych of storytelling mariner and vespers-celebrating priest found in the first and last of Jones's *Ancient Mariner* prints. It is true that Dai's boast resembles a dramatic performance, while the Queen's visit is in a sense a ritual, but the analogy will not hold up. Though the mariner and Dai each stand in a mirror-image relationship to the Guest and John Ball, respectively, only Dai foregrounds the violent competition this relationship makes possible, one which can both contribute to and threaten communal cohesion, in the dynamic I have been describing as that of poetic fratricide. Similarly, though the priest and the Queen both make offerings, the priest stands at the head of a living community before an altar which we cannot see, whereas the Queen walks among a community of the fallen calling our attention to its hidden beauty. Finally, while the tension between the mariner and the priest concerns two different ways of forming a community, one poetic and one religious, that between Dai's boast and the Queen's visitation concerns, on the one hand, Dai's poetic attempt to form a community, and on the other, Dai's exclusion from the community which, as the Queen acknowledges, he has successfully formed, but which has become visible only in death.

Dai's absence and the Queen's presence do, however, resemble a pairing we have seen elsewhere in Jones's work: that between the center-stage Bride and the off-screen crucifixion in Jones's print *The Bride*. Like the Bride, the Queen directs our attention to the fallen soldiers through "her influential eyes" and "her awarding hands," which is to say, she acts as an applauding audience, witnessing what she did not herself create (185). The Queen's inability to

locate Dai does suggest that Jones has yet to overcome the communicative failure between audience and artwork, but the Queen, unlike the Bride, has her compensations. Of the eleven soldiers she successfully crowns, six are previously known to us, and two in particular, Mr. Jenkins and Aneirin Lewis, have surfaced repeatedly in Parts I–VI, acquiring a definite personality along the way (though not quite a character in the sense of conventional realism) before receiving lengthy verse tributes upon their deaths in Part VII. The presence of these figures ties “this elect society” to the quite mundane members of ‘B’ Company whom we have been following in the book until now. Jenkins and Aneirin also remind us of the different ways art can enter into a human life and a human community without reducing either to pure aesthesis. Neither figure offers the final solution to the problem of poetic fratricide, but *In Parenthesis* honors each for what he does accomplish, and this honoring is crucial to the meaning of the Queen’s visitation.

Jenkins, lieutenant of ‘B’ Company, holds legitimate authority over the other soldiers, but, as we witness on multiple occasions, does not abuse it, instead treating his subordinates as spiritual equals. In tribute to this refusal of spiritual hierarchy, the Queen admits him to the bower and “plaits torques of equal splendor for Mr. Jenkins and Billy Crower,” an enlisted man about whom we know little more than his name (185). This equality comes about not in spite of, but because of Mr. Jenkins’s beneficent exercise of his authority, which Jones casts in Biblical terms: “Mr. Jenkins watched them file through, himself following, like western-hill shepherd” (30). Mr. Jenkins’ role as good shepherd culminates with his death in the very moment of leading his devoted subordinates into battle:

He makes the conventional sign  
and there is the deeply inward effort of spent men who would make response for him,  
and take it at the double.  
He sinks on one knee  
and now on the other, [...]  
(166)

Like Mr. Jenkins' own men, we are at first confused as to the reason for his kneeling. Though we quickly surmise that he has been shot, in our momentary confusion we see superimposed on Mr. Jenkins's apparent actions (actually unconscious reflexes) the ritual gestures of a priest approaching the altar at the beginning of the Latin mass.<sup>6</sup> The phrase at the center of the liturgy, "my body given up for you," now seems curiously apposite: Mr. Jenkins has given up his life for his men. The irony, however, is that whatever ritual Mr. Jenkins here enacts is unintentional, and its success, insofar as it has any, is unrelated to any artistic merit.

Aneirin Lewis engages with the poetic more consciously than does Mr. Jenkins, and accordingly the Queen of the Woods awards him the place of honor and spends the most time on his gift:

Among this July noblesse she is mindful of December wood—when the trees of the forest beat against each other because of him.  
She carries to Aneirin-in-the-nullah a rowan sprig, for the glory of Guenedota. You couldn't hear what she said to him, because she was careful for the Disciplines of the Wars.  
(186)

These words recall the many moments in which Aneirin contemplates Welsh mythology (to which, an endnote tells us, "December Wood" and "Guedota" are references). Aneirin is dedicated to this mythology, not as an artist to his own work, but as a link to the chain of cultural transmission in which it is a part. Aneirin's greatest worry is that the chain will be

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Fr. John David Ramsey for bringing this parallel to my attention.



broken by Welshmen like Private Watcyn, who knows much about football but “was innocent of his descent from Aeneas [...] which pained his lance-corporal friend, for whom Troy still burned” (89). Aneirin senses that if these chains were broken, we would lose not merely some beautiful poems but a sense of “how a lance-corporal’s stripe is but held vicariously and from on high, is of one texture with an eternal economy” (2). So he works to preserve this sense of texture, in much the same way that Mr. Jenkins works to exercise his vicarious authority virtuously. Aneirin’s role as preserver of continuities becomes literal in Part III, where the men of ‘B’ Company march at night, able only to hear one another’s voices: “Lance-Corporal Lewis sings where he walks, yet in a low voice, because of the Disciplines of the Wars” (42). Even in abiding by these disciplines Aneirin carries on the tradition: he borrows the phrase from the Welsh captain Fluellen of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (a play to which we will soon return). The Queen of the Woods honors his devotion to these disciplines by submitting to them herself.

One senses, however, that the Queen’s condescension in the matter of the disciplines is just that, condescension. Aneirin’s concerns about proper transmission of the tradition are admitted into the Queen’s bower, but she is not bound by them in the same way Aneirin was; rather, she admits them because she honors Aneirin himself. The same condescension surfaces in the scene of Aneirin’s death by incoming mortar, which takes the form of a mythological catalog of comparatives:

more blistered he is than painted Troy Towers  
and unwholer, limb from limb, than any of them fallen at Catraeth  
or on the seaboard-down, by Salisbury,  
and no maker to contrive his funerary song.  
(155)

An irony lingers in the last line, since Jones himself now plays the part of such a maker. We

must notice, however, that the irony is partially leveled against Aneirin. Jones's funerary song honors Aneirin, but is not of the sort Aneirin would have sung for himself, beginning with the opening, shockingly deflationary lines: "No one to care there for Aneirin Lewis spilled there | who worshipped his ancestors like a Chink." To the poet of *In Parenthesis*, Aneirin's unselfconscious commitment to his native culture are a naive cliché, admirable but impossible to fully endorse or imitate. The irony of Aneirin's death is in a way akin to that of Jenkins'. Aneirin receives his funerary song, just as Mr. Jenkins dies kneeling before an altar, with the help of the poet's artistry, his ability to poetically frame our perception of the soldiers' lifeless bodies. But neither the lament nor the gesture are the meaning of that artistry—both are merely particular applications of it.

It would be a mistake, then, to determine those qualities shared by Aneirin and Jenkins—for example, their opposition to inhuman applications of human hierarchies, or their integration of artistic practices into human life—and identify these as what the Queen of the Woods seeks to honor. Dai Greatcoat's various personae may have been ambiguously linked together by the first-person singular pronoun and chains of mythopoetic reasoning, but the secret princes are incorrigibly plural, the Queen's awards determined "according to precedence" but one whose logic is not available for us to inspect. She does not care that we know two of those crowned much better than any of the other nine; she does not care that some are officers and some enlisted men; she does not care that seven are British and four are German; what does she care about? The impossibility of rationalizing the Queen's selections is in one case explicitly thematized: "That swine Lillywhite has daisies to his chain—you'd hardly credit it"; in another, it seems a mere pun: "Siôn gets St. John's Wort—that's fair enough," Siôn

being the Welsh form of Sean, that is, John (185). The choice of daisies or St. John's Wort—or saxifrage, seet-briar, myrtle, dog-violets, or rowan—seems to respond personally to each soldier, but we know neither the true judgment of that personality, nor the precise meaning of each flower (even if we consult a dictionary of floral symbolism, each flower admits numerous, often incompatible interpretations). In the face of such an opaque language of flowers we are at an impasse, able at most to venture hypotheses. Authorial dicta might resolve the factual question of why Jones associated Fatty with sweet-briar, but they would not change the passage's aesthetic effect; as T. S. Eliot puts it in his note of introduction to the book, such statements “merely provide the serious researcher with more material to interpret and dissect” (vii).

Unable to specify the meaning of the flowers, we feel even more intensely their meaningfulness. They suggest to us how incomprehensible and unpredictable is the shining forth of personality in moments such as those over which the Queen presides. This impression depends on our acquaintance with Jenkins and Aneirin, but it differs fundamentally from the relationship to art which determined Jenkins and Aneirin's lives and deaths. The Queen acknowledges the rectitude of those relationships only to prescind from them, showing us what the audience sees when it honors an artwork *qua* artwork. It does not see the artist *qua* artist: Dai has faded away, and in any case Dai is not David Jones, but only a figure for him. Rather, the Queen discovers a hidden community among those who had once been rivals, and who do not seem to have anything obviously in common other than all being soldiers (and hence, for Jones, artists), and all being dead, which is to say, their fratricide being fully consummated. After this vision of the Queen, the wounded John Ball, only named survivor of the battle, is

treated by the nurse Miss Melpomene, the muse of tragedy. It may seem surprising, given Jones's tendency to over-explain his poetry, that the Queen's choices of flower receive no interpretation within the text. But in fact Jones rarely explains aesthetic meaning, for the book seeks to demonstrate the impossibility of any such explanation. We see as much when we look across the page from Miss Melpomene to the lines discussed in the previous chapter concerning three men, he "who was on the field," he "who wrote the book," and he "who does not know this"—which is to say, Dai Greatcoat, John Ball, and the book's reader, respectively. After the enigmatic beauty of the Queen of the Wood's flowers, the narrator feels compelled to remind us that we have not understood anything of its significance.

Jones does not want us to read in order to understand so much as to experience and value. Such, at least, he suggests in the preface, when he describes the meaning of his book:

I have only tried to make a shape in words, using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior, the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular and of those particular men. I have attempted to appreciate some things, which, at the time of suffering, the flesh was too weak to appraise. (x)

The juxtaposition of these sentences can at first surprise us, for shaping data and appraising suffering do not seem to have much to do with one another. The parallelism between the sentences suggests, however, that they say the same thing twice, and so we recognize that Jones understands the shaping just to be the appreciating and appraising. The latter two words are particularly good for Jones' purposes, for they unite value in the sense of what is precious and to be praised, with value in the sense of intelligible significance. We ought to notice also that, if "the flesh" serves as subject of these acts, so too does it serve as object, as the next paragraph makes clear: "they bore in their bodies the genuine tradition of the Island of Britain, from

Bendigeid Vran to Jingle and Marie Lloyd” (x). The flesh was at first “too weak” for the task of comprehending these embodied traditions, and even now can only be said to have “tried” and “attempted,” phrases which acknowledge that it may have failed to shape and appreciate properly.

Jones’s preface is, in fact, primarily concerned with the forces that might conspire to prevent the achievement of a shape in words for the relationship between tradition and authorial experience. As I read him, he spends several paragraphs considering and rejecting two tempting but incomplete pictures of the problem, pictures which, incidentally, correspond to a common critique and a common defense of Jones’s book. Jones begins by anticipating the objection of Paul Fussell, who accused *In Parenthesis* of denying what he terms (I think wrongly) the “irony” of war, by which he means the meaninglessness of its absolute novelty.<sup>7</sup> Fussell is, in a sense, correct, but not because Jones is unaware of the effects of such novelty. He introduces them on the preface’s first page, with his first mention of (René Hague’s) *Roland*:

The wholesale slaughter of the later years, the conscripted levies filling the gaps in every file of four, knocked the bottom out of the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingents of men, within whose structure Roland could find and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver. (ix)

*In Parenthesis* deals, Jones admits here, with the time when Rolands were still possible. The importance of this possibility, for Jones, hinges on the difference between simile and metaphor: not only could one at first have friendships akin to that of Roland, but more, one could thereby *become* Roland, or at least become an allusion to him. Jones regrets the loss of this allusive possibility as much as the loss of the friendship. The very next sentence notes: “In the earlier

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<sup>7</sup> For Fussell’s account of why war is always “ironic,” see Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 7ff; for his critique of Jones, see 178–191.

months there was a certain attractive amateurishness, and elbow-room for idiosyncrasy that connected one with a less exacting past” (ix). Specific amateurish connections can be lost and mourned, as Jones does here, and the loss of the possibility of being Roland is not fatal to the way of life Jones values. If, however, the very possibility of such possibilities were to be lost, even mourning would become impossible, and it would in a sense no longer be possible to live a human life. Needless to say, if such a situation were to arise then there would also no longer be any place for poetry, in Jones’s dictionary synonymous with idiosyncrasy and amateurishness.

If Jones’s poetry cannot survive absolute novelty, it cannot escape, and knows it cannot escape, what we might call the irony of belatedness. Jones introduces belatedness by way of Shakespeare’s *Henriad*:

No one, I suppose, however much not given to association, could see infantry in tin-hats, with ground-sheets over their shoulders, with sharpened pine-stakes in their hands, and not recall

“... or may we cram,  
Within this wooden O ...” (xi)

These lines come from the Prologue to *Henry V*, when the Chorus apologizes for the impossibility of fitting the events of the Hundred Years War within the confines of the Globe Theater. I take it that, unlike Jones’s earlier fears about Roland, there is no sense here that the Shakespeare allusion might become meaningless. Jones does suggest, though, that the encampments of the Great War are to the encampments of the historical King Henry V as play-acting is to the real thing, and so, further, that the book *In Parenthesis* is, either way you look at it, at a double remove from reality: it imitates either the imitation of Agincourt that was the

Great War, or the imitation of Agincourt that was Shakespeare's *Henriad*.

Since the preface is quite clear on this point, it is no surprise that Jonesians have picked up on it in their responses to Fussell, often exaggerating its significance.<sup>8</sup> The problem with attributing to Jones such a quasi-Platonic position is not that he does not give an account of the irony of belatedness, but that he sees the brute fact of such belatedness as only one facet of the real problem. Hence he immediately follows this Shakespearean quotation with another he sees as more sophisticated:

But there were deeper complexities of sight and sound to make ever present

“the pibble pabble in Pompey's camp”

Every man's speech and habit of mind were a perpetual showing: now of Napier's expedition, now of the Legions at the Wall, now of “train-band captain,” now of Jack Cade, of John Ball, of the commons in arms. Now [...] (xi)

These showings are deeper because they cannot be reduced to a simple binary: if speech and habit of mind identify one's location on a cultural map, they also show how such identifications are multilayered and unreliable. Jones borrows the ‘pibble pabble’ phrase from Fluellen—the model, recall, for Aneirin Lewis, and source of the phrase “the Disciplines of the Wars”—praising the *absence* of pibble-pabble in Pompey's camp, by way of contrast with the English:

If you would take the pains but to examine the wars of Pompey the Great, you shall find, I warrant you, that there is no tiddle toddle nor pibble pabble in Pompey's camp. I

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<sup>8</sup> Hence Kathleen Henderson Staudt: “Far from rationalizing or validating the present war, as Fussell suggests, the heroic allusions in *In Parenthesis* emphasize the contrast between the new and strange mechanisms at work on the battlefield and the soldiers on the field, who are much as they had always been.” Staudt, *At the Turn of A Civilization*, 19. But Fussell too has read Jones's preface, only he distrusts it more: “The poem is a deeply conservative work which uses the past not, as it often pretends to do, to shame the present, but really to ennoble it”. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 181.

warrant you, you shall find the ceremonies of the wars and the cares of it and the forms of it and the sobriety of it and the modesty of it to be otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

So every man's speech seems to show both the conflict between the wars of today and those of the past, and the continuity between today's denunciations of that difference and the denunciations of the past—a shared sense of isolation, a continuous history of conflict between past and present. Adrian Poole comes closer to the mark than Staudt when he remarks that “the memory of Shakespeare is, for Jones, at best rueful, quizzical, humorous, and at times [but only at times!] caustically ironic.”<sup>10</sup> Such a catalog could describe for Jones *all* cultural continuities, and not only in the present day, but also for the traditions with which present authors hope to achieve continuity. War represents a danger to tradition, but not a new one, and, just as importantly, tradition is the kind of thing that can be endangered but still survive.

If the continuity of a tradition can be experienced, not as purely present or purely absent, but as a series of disparate relationships, it is because the experience itself, like the tradition itself, extends across time. Events, for Jones, are not fully experienced at the time they occur, but rather after they have been reflected on and linked to other experiences personal and literary. This sense of unfolding significance comes to dominate Jones' aesthetic; John Breslin writes that Jones' art always begins with “an irreducible datum of experience, essentially an observation, to which Jones adds layer upon layer of verbal (or, in the case of his paintings, visual) allusions and symbols to make his final image.”<sup>11</sup> The conclusion of any given work of art constitutes not a capstone to the tradition, but a provisional stopping place within it.

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<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V* IV.i.70–74.

<sup>10</sup> Poole, “The Disciplines of War, Memory, and Writing,” 94.

<sup>11</sup> Breslin, “David Jones,” 88.



And just as the originary experience (while spreading tendrils of significance across space and time) took place in a particular there and then, so the re-enactment must be spatially and temporally bounded:

This writing is called “In Parenthesis” because I have written it in a kind of space between—I don’t know between quite what—but as you turn aside to do something; and because for us amateur soldiers (and especially for the writer, who was not only amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade’s despair) the war itself was a parenthesis—how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of ’18—and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis. (xv)

This triple analogy, between the experience of the war, the act of writing about the war, and the entirety of human life, bears following out. Given Jones’ sense that the artwork, while taking place after the war, is also in a sense a kind of accretion around it, we have a triple parenthesis. The artwork, like the experience itself, is an interim activity, encompassed on both sides by a more important activity, and so itself non-professional. It matters only insofar as it will be re-enacted and judged through the life within which it is situated. Further, the analogy suggests a hidden fourth term, whatever lies outside life’s parenthesis:

(( ([OUR PRIVATE] WAR[S] )  
[MY] WRITING )  
[OUR PUBLIC] EXISTENCE HERE )  
[THE FINAL JUDGMENT]

The “writing,” the artwork, appraises an experience of “war,” of painful privation. It does so through reshaping it, and so is itself a shape that one can appraise throughout one’s life here, during which one shares “our curious type of existence.” That life, affected by the artwork, takes on a shape of its own, which cannot be appraised within the life but which awaits an

implicit final judgment.<sup>12</sup>

And, crucially, it is a *shared* life, “our curious type of existence here.” This shared life consists in the re-enactment and appraisal of the artwork, just as the artwork re-enacted and appraised the experience. But at this third level the re-enactment and appraisal are something done by the entire interpretive community, artist and auditor together. A passage from a few pages earlier in the preface elaborates on this theory of the collective poetic encounter:

I did not intend this as a “War Book”—it happens to be concerned with war. I should prefer it to be about a good kind of peace—but as Mandeville says, “Of Paradys ne can I not speken properly I was not there; it is fer beyonde and that for thinketh me. And also I was not worthi.” We find ourselves privates in foot regiments. We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful, to us.

We are shy when pious men write A.M.D.G. [*ad maiorem dei gloriam*, “to the greater glory of God”] on their note-paper—however, in the Welsh Codes of Court Procedure the Bard of the Household is instructed to sing to the Queen when she goes to her chamber to rest. He is instructed to sing first to her a song in honour of God. He must then sing the song of the Battle of Camlann—the song of treachery and of the undoing of all things; and afterward he must sing any song she may choose to hear. I have tried, to so make this writing for anyone who would care to play Welsh Queen. (xii-xiii)

We have here again a juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated thoughts (one of Jones’s favorite compositional techniques). What do these paragraphs have in common? The first

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth comparing this dynamic to that sometimes insinuated by the preface to Jones’s second book, *The Anthemata*, in which the artwork is meant to encompass the artist’s entire life: “one is trying to make a shape of the very things of which one is oneself made” (Jones, *Epoch and Artist* 108). Hence:

( ( EXPERIENCE = LIFE )  
ARTWORK = JUDGMENT )

This version of the equation oversimplifies things, forgetting that “life” here does not mean *my* life, but *our* shared life. *The Anthemata*, we might say, takes for granted in what our shared life consists, and then tries to evaluate it. It feels no obligation ever to conclude that evaluation, because it is not, after all, ever to be presented to an audience whose reaction to it matters. We are presented only fragments of “a longish [indeed, infinitely long] conversation between two friends,” and can only guess at “how the talk had passed from the cultivation of cabbages to Melchizedek” (128–9).

suggests three possible themes which a poet might intend for his poem—war, paradise, and the search for formal goodness—and suggests that the poet must choose between them, and ought to choose the third. The second takes up the same possible themes (now in a different order), and suggests not a choice, but a synthesis. *In Parenthesis* claims to be in some sense about all three, and to find the relationship between them in the audience which it seeks, an audience identified as somehow queenly .

Following the order of the second paragraph, poetry is first of all “in honour of God.” Such honoring would be accomplished most directly through a depiction of “a good kind of peace,” and the best kind of peace would be “Paradys.” But we have no direct experience of what lies outside the parenthesis of our lives, and so we can honor God and express our desire for Paradise only through the goodness we find in *this* life. This honoring is, however, the juxtaposition suggests, a sign that Paradise exists and can be hoped for (even if it cannot be directly re-presented). As Jones writes almost twenty years later in “Art and Sacrament,” whenever art is made with even “the barest of skill [...] we would appear already to be in the domain of sign (sacrament), of anamnesis, of anathemata. We are beasts of a sort, but not, it would seem, perishing beasts.”<sup>13</sup>

Second, poetry is “of treachery and of the undoing of all things”; it laments the violent consequences of human evil. But nevertheless *In Parenthesis* is not “a War Book,” with a capital “W,” and cannot be, for reasons opposite to those why it cannot be a book of Paradise. Paradise exists, but we have yet to experience it; we have accidentally experienced lower-case war (this book “happens to be concerned with war”), but War has no substantial existence. In

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 156.

“Art and Sacrament,” Jones argues that “a sign then must be significant of something, hence of some ‘reality’, so of something ‘good’, so of something that is ‘sacred’.”<sup>14</sup> For Jones, war is not a reality in this sense, but only (as it is termed in classical theodicy) a privation. Crucially, the claim is *not* that War, like Paradise, stands outside of life such that neither can be experienced directly but in everything the two can be found intermingled. The implications of such a claim would be Manichean: all we could hope for would be to escape from evil by escaping from experience. Rather, Jones’s claim is that, though in the subjective order of the artist’s intentions (the first paragraph) the chaos of war at first seems all too real—“we find ourselves privates in foot regiments” (note the pun on “privation”)—nevertheless the artist can only begin properly by realizing that a War book is precisely what he cannot write. In the objective order of the artwork’s purpose (the second paragraph), lamentation of suffering is necessary, but it must be subordinate to the honor of God.

If not write a War book, what must the artist do? The answer Jones gives in “Art and Scholasticism” is something like ‘discover new forms’:

the forms which [military] strategy shows forth can be typic only of that archetypal form-making and ordering implicit in the credal clause *per quem omnia facta sunt* [“by whom all things were made”]. That is to say they participate in some sense, however difficult to posit, of that juxtaposing by which what was *inanis et vacua* [“without form and void,” cf. Genesis 1:2] became radiant with form and abhorrent of vacua by the action of the Artifex, the Logos [cf. John 1:1]<sup>15</sup>

This suggestion that human creativity participates in divine freedom accords perfectly with Jones’s neo-scholastic antecedents (if less so with the medieval philosophy that inspired it). The preface to *In Parenthesis*, however, is in some ways closer to Kant’s sense of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 160.

universalizability and so normativity of aesthetic judgment. In concluding one's search for formal goodness with some specific form, one makes the implicit claim that others will and should agree with your conclusion. The first paragraph emphasizes the community of the poetic act: "*We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful, to us [my emphasis].*" The second paragraph emphasizes the diversity contained within that community: "he must sing any song she may choose to hear." That is to say, the artist tries to see his way to a formal judgment that will be choice-worthy both for himself and for his audience. This emphasis on freedom of choice survives into "Art and Sacrament": "it is a degree of freedom of some sort that causes man to be, of necessity, an artist."<sup>16</sup> But the importance allotted to the community of the artists and (what amounts to the same thing) to the auditor's freedom does not, and so requires further elucidation.

The metaphysical status of this imagined auditor is difficult to pin down. Jones seeks to write "any song she may choose to hear," that is, to write the kind of poem that would be chosen, by "anyone who would care to play Welsh Queen," that is, anyone who would choose to play-act at choosing this poem. Our choice of this poem does not cause it to be written, but Jones invites us to imagine that it does, and writes for those of us who will do so. Even if we do choose it, though, our choice will only be for one night. Jones does not insist on his poem's absolute choiceworthiness, but rather on the more restrained proposition that his poem is the kind of thing that it would be possible for any of us to choose, if we so desired, and hence that it is a product of our shared search for formal goodness, rather than of some other, more debased motive. We can differentiate here between two words Jones used as near-synonyms,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 150.

and say: we need not appreciate the poem in order appraise it as the kind of thing that one can choose to appreciate. If we accept Jones's suggestion that the poem is indeed a thing of this kind, we thereby acknowledge not only a fact about the form of *In Parenthesis*, namely, that it is the kind of thing that can be chosen, but also a fact about the author, that he was capable of this kind of judgment.

Our Welsh Queen's choice of *In Parenthesis* is not, then, too different from how the Queen of the Wood "can choose twelve gentle-men" because she "knows who is most lord." These choices come at different stages in the hierarchy of parentheses, but are analogous. The choice of the Welsh Queen incorporates an artwork into the shared lives of author and audience. Both beyond and within the incorporation comes the choice of the Queen of the Woods: she brings the community of the fallen into whatever lies beyond life, and in doing so becomes a figure for the uniting of the author's individual experiences into the work of art. We come to understand this latter fact, however, only after reading the preface and seeing how Jones chooses there to interpret his own poem. This fact, in turn, offers a way of understanding the complexity of *In Parenthesis*, the many parentheses which the work itself contains—the body of the narrative nestled within a myriad of epigraphs, between preface and endnotes, between frontispiece and tailpiece. These levels do not attempt to bypass the interpretive choices of the reader by pre-establishing the parentheses radiating out from work, to life, to afterlife; rather, they point us towards the importance of those choices and offer a model for how they can be approached.

What each reader gets out of these interpretive choices Jones terms, in the Queen of the Woods passage, "their fragile prize." The prize is fragile because it does not establish anything,

having no definite meaning, but only achieves a glimmering of meaningfulness. This meaningfulness, for Jones, has something to do with personhood. *In Parenthesis* asks us to choose between two kinds of choices: choosing between persons seen as “hidden princes,” and choosing between persons seen as interchangeable parts. The latter kind of choice, for Jones, verges on the demonic. When scouting parties encounter the enemy, it is “the dark meeting of these by lot chosen—each the Azazel to each, other daemon drawn to other” (70); when an unnamed officer assigns Aneirin Lewis and a friend to a billeting party, “Here comes bloody Anti-Christ [...] sheep nor goats don’t signify [...] he chooses without distinction of persons” (114). The Queens choose the former, and so join both the good officer who instructs “Mr. Wogan-Powis to choose his carriers with consideration” (125), and John Ball himself, who “would choose her among many,” “her” being the rifle which has come to figure his artistic and hence his meaning-making capacity (184). We can see others as hidden princes, rather than numbers on a chart, by seeing how their fragile meaningfulness resides in the recursive parenthetical structure figured by the form of *In Parenthesis*.

## 2. “The Sea and the Mirror”: The Greatest Grandest Opera

In the analogy I drew last chapter between *In Parenthesis* and “The Sea and the Mirror,” John Ball loosely corresponded to Antonio and Sebastian, and especially to Antonio, whose violent retorts cannot cease until Miranda draws the circle of Chapter II to a close. Dai Greatcoat found a more exact analogue in Prospero, confined to Chapter I and so absent from Miranda’s circle much as the Queen cannot find the old soldier. In what follows I will argue for the third part of this analogy, implicit already in the first two: that the Queen of the Woods

herself resembles Miranda, whose song of being “linked as children in a circle dancing” achieves a similar effect to the Queen’s floral ceremony. Since I have suggested earlier in this chapter that the ceremony of the Queen of the Woods has no determinate meaning, it will come as no surprise that the first stage of my argument here will be to show that the song of Miranda likewise says hardly anything at all.

This nineteen-line lyric is a villanelle, like the sestina a form tightly constrained to the point of obsession. It can seem almost impossible for either to communicate a meaning apart from the formal restrictions themselves. But whereas the sestina—recall last chapter’s discussion of Sebastian—is intricate, consisting of six key-words permuted through seven combinations as if hunting for the key to a semantic lock, the villanelle is simple, its repetition consisting in a tight but not difficult rhyme scheme and two alternately recurring lines. These lines become not so much stumbling blocks as lyrical touchstones, phrases which either enchant us with their sheer beauty, or else—do not:

My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely,  
As the poor and sad are real to the good king,  
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

Up jumped the Black Man behind the elder tree,  
Turned a somersault and ran away waving;  
My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely.

The Witch gave a squawk; her venomous body  
Melted into light as water leaves a spring,  
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

At his crossroads, too, the Ancient prayed for me;  
Down his wasted cheeks tears of joy were running;  
My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely.



He kissed me awake and no one was sorry;  
The sun shone on sails, eyes, pebbles, anything,  
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

So, to remember our changing garden, we  
Are linked as children in a circle dancing:  
My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely.  
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

(25-6)

Readers of “The Sea and the Mirror” have differed wildly in their estimation of these lines. For Amanda Lowry French, they merely prove Prospero correct in thinking his daughter a silly lovesick goose: “Naïve, narrow, and narcissistic, she lives only for love; that her Dear One is hers is the beginning and end of her knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> Edward Mendelson makes almost the opposite judgment, finding this villanelle “the most subtle and delicate of all Auden’s lyrics”<sup>18</sup>; he suggests that Miranda knows quite a lot, and knows above all that “in a universe of forgiveness, an imperfect, incomplete circle is more than enough.”<sup>19</sup> What are we to make of such contradictory assessments?

Undoubtedly, Miranda trafficks in romantic clichés. Her imagery comes primarily from fairy tales and popular movies—the lines about the witch melting, for example, seem to allude to *The Wizard of Oz*. Most of these lines, moreover, bear little direct relation to the plot of *The Tempest*, suggesting only a vague sense of unexpectedly happy endings. We wonder if by “the Black Man” Miranda means Caliban, or by “the Witch,” Sycorax, or by “the Ancient,” Prospero, but it would be difficult to maintain the identifications too strongly: Miranda’s weeping Ancient seems less a father than a *genius loci*; her Witch feels far more American than

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<sup>17</sup> French, “Refrain, Again,” 158.

<sup>18</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 542.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 545.

Mediterranean, and in any case Sycorax is already dead before *The Tempest* begins; and her Black Man with his somersaults and waves acts less like a savage than a circus performer, while the elder tree behind which he hides has magical connotations, making him seem less Caliban than Ariel. Whatever allegorical interpretation we are tempted to offer could not but be eisegesis. At the same time, however, the clichés do not fit together into a familiar cultural script; while each image taken alone is thoroughly familiar, their combination is not, and herein lies the poem's subtlety. As Miranda begins to circulate these precisely chosen clichés, she achieves a sense of meaningfulness without having to specify her meaning. The reader's task with this villanelle is less to determine why Miranda summons these particular images than to appreciate what happens when she singles them out.

The same applies to the two refrains, which in a different way point us back to the villanelle's core concern with the thin line between cliché and profundity. Eight of the nineteen lines are merely the same two lines repeated four times: "My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely. | And the high green hill sits always by the sea." These images are presented as paradigmatically poetic, and indeed refer to the title of the book, "The Sea and the Mirror," as if to offer us the key to the entire work. The insight they offer us, however, is minimal: the second has the ring of tautology, the first of paradox. In the poem's imaginative lexicon, you cannot have a hill without a sea to overlook, or a sea without a hill overlooking it, and their togetherness is also their apartness. Mirrors, meanwhile, are always lonely, and dear ones, since they are dear to us, are always ours; the analogy between the two suggests simultaneously that the lover and beloved are as securely together as the mirror is securely lonely, and that the act of possession itself is one of loneliness. Both lines, in short, are celebratory, but also pensive,

aware of and resigned to the vaguely specified necessary limits placed on romantic union. By ending each stanza with one of these two lines, Miranda not only writes a villanelle, she subdues each of the fairy-tale images to a similarly subtle emotional pitch.

In the final quatrain Miranda turns her elusive imagination toward a theme running throughout Chapter II, that of the enclosed green place. Miranda's version closely tracks the negative pastoral vision of Antonio, but modifies it in several crucial ways. Antonio, recall, had declared that Prospero would

Never have time to curl up at the center  
Time turns on when completely reconciled,  
Never become and therefore never enter  
The green occluded pasture as a child.

(14)

Miranda does not respond by saying that we can indeed enter the green place; instead, she offers a different relationship than entrance, saying that we can “remember” it. We exist in time, and not only cannot, but should not hope to escape it or reach a place where time ceases to make differences. Indeed, even the garden itself, in Miranda's version, is not “occluded” (stopped up, obstructed, crystallized) but rather “changing”; it is not only historically separated from the act of remembrance, but is itself situated within the flux of time. Furthermore, existence within temporal differences allows communication across interpersonal ones. Where Antonio speaks in the second-person singular—you, Prospero, will never be “as a child”—Miranda uses the first-person plural, emphasized through the first line's enjambment: “we | Are linked as children.”

The two phrases just quoted turn on the same two words, *as* and *child[ren]*, but they use this preposition and noun to quite different effect. Antonio's “as” does not draw a simile, but

rather identifies a manner: Prospero will “never enter | The green occluded pasture as a child” *because* he will “Never become [...] a child.” Antonio mocks Prospero for his inability to turn back time. For Miranda, on the other hand, there is no question of returning to childhood. We can only hope to become childlike rather than insisting on our mastery, which is to say, we can become openly rather than covertly dependent on one another. The dancing in the garden fulfills a certain longing for community, but it can do so only because it is not a fantasy Miranda alone possesses, but rather an image of what has actually happened in Chapter II, where the lyrical utterances of the cast of characters have been arranged in a circle.

Each of Miranda’s alterations to Antonio’s fantasy can be understood as a concession, an acknowledgment that the vision Antonio sketches only to deny its availability is, indeed, unavailable. But it is not necessary to take them in this mood; they can, instead, be read as corrections, showing Antonio not just what will make his vision possible, but what will make it truly desirable. This is also the light in which we should understand the parallel between Antonio’s *terza rima* and Miranda’s villanelle, both forms involving a sequence of tercets culminating in a quatrain. Antonio’s form evokes what he accuses Prospero of depending upon, a self-contained rhetorical perfection. Miranda’s villanelle, in contrast, may be well-formed, but its form is not reassuring so much as bewilderingly evanescent. It is this gentle touch which also characterizes her mercurial version of the encircled garden, memorable but impermanent, meaningful but without precise significance. The peculiar character of Miranda’s villanelle undermines Lucy McDiarmid’s otherwise convincing claim that “the formality and ‘literariness’ of ‘The Supporting Cast’ undermine it from within, exposing the wedding feast as artificial at

the same time as the characters in their sincere, unironic utterances affirm it as genuine.”<sup>20</sup> For Miranda does not affirm the wedding feast as sincere or genuine, if these words are taken to mean rooted in a thing’s permanent essence; her garden is, above all, changing.

If Miranda’s depiction of the changing garden makes no claim to the absolute, the preceding tercet explicitly denies us any kind of absolution. Where Antonio had spoken loftily of time being “completely reconciled,” Miranda imagines a quite different scene:

He kissed me awake and no one was sorry;  
The sun shone on sails, eyes, pebbles, anything

Though “no one was sorry” means primarily that no one regretted the kiss the charming Prince Ferdinand bestowed on Miranda-as-sleeping-beauty, the precise wording also raises the question of contrition and forgiveness. Together with the next line, the phrase summons the specter of the end of Yeats’s “Dialogue of Self and Soul,” discussed previously in Chapter Three. But where Yeats casts out remorse, Miranda merely looks around and recognizes that no one was sorry. And where Yeats finds blest “Everything we look upon,” Miranda sees the sun shine on “sails, eyes, pebbles, anything.” These differences achieve two related effects. First, Miranda does not imagine that art can force anyone—and surely she has in mind here Antonio—to reconcile with the rest of the community. After all, the longing for such compulsion was what separated Antonio and Prospero from the happy circle of dancers in the first place. Second, the blessing Miranda does imagine her artful wedding bringing about does not transform the entire world, but only whatever happens, for the moment, to fall within its ambit. The result is essentially provisional: any particular thing might be blest if beheld through poetic

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<sup>20</sup> McDiarmid, *Auden’s Apologies for Poetry*, 110.

eyes, but everything can never be so.

The community Miranda figures at the end of Chapter II is not, then, a moral or political one, composed, say, of all those who abide by a particular vision of justice and the common good. Rather, it is a personal one, its reality consisting in the mere fact that all the persons in Chapter II can join in Miranda's dance (even if, like Antonio, or the warring soldiers, they often refuse to do so). It is also a belated one; like Jones's Queen of the Woods Miranda comes only at the end, after all the inhabitants of Chapter II have sung their songs of communal desires and (save for the hostile Antonio) fallen silent. These qualities correspond to two important questions regarding Miranda's villanelle which we will have to look beyond her words in order to answer. First, who is Miranda, such that that she has the power to draw this dancing circle into the open? Second, what happens after we move beyond the circle's ambit?

Auden addresses both questions early in Chapter III, in Caliban's initial echo of the audience. If we remember the plot of *The Tempest*, this transition from Miranda to Caliban is peculiar and even disturbing, given that he has tried to rape her. It seems partly in response to Auden's cruel juxtaposition that (Caliban's version of) the audience begins by complaining that "the all-wise, all-explaining master" (meaning Shakespeare, but also Auden) has offended against Miranda, "*our native muse*" (27), by introducing to her world of poetry the figure of Caliban, "the one child of her Awful Enemy" (29). Caliban represents for the audience brute reality, opposed to the spirit of poetic ingenuity:

*She foresaw what He would do to the conversation, lying in wait for its vision of private love or public justice to warm to an Egyptian brilliance and then with some fishlike odour or bruit insolite snatching the visionaries back tongue-tied and blushing to the here and now; she foresaw what He would do to the arrangements, breaking, by a refusal to keep in step, the excellent order of the dancing ring, and ruining supper by knocking over the*

*loaded appetising tray; worst of all, she foresaw, she dreaded, what He would end up doing to her, that, not content with upsetting her guests, with spoiling their fun, His progress from outrage to outrage would not relent before the gross climax of his making, horror unspeakable, a pass at her virgin self. (29)*

Caliban's audience demands an answer to the question: how is it not an offense against the integrity of Miranda's poetic circle to write a play containing Caliban? (We might compare this question with that Jones tried to answer in his preface: how is it not an offense against art to write a book about total war?) The remainder of "The Sea and the Mirror," save for Ariel's song of parting, consists of Caliban's prolix attempt to justify both Shakespeare's and Auden's art.

How we understand this attempt depends in large part on what we understand Caliban to be. On the one hand, we could, like Alan Jacobs, take Caliban to signify the limits of the poet's power, such that he is difficult to fit into poetry because poets, modern poets at least, do not want to admit their finitude: "A key Romantic error, then, is to assume that the poet controls language and imagination; the truth, rather, [Auden believes,] is that language and imagination are the unacknowledged legislators of the poets. But at some point every poet, because poets are merely human, will be forced to make that acknowledgment."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, we could follow Jo-Anne Cappeluti in identifying Caliban as a channel for and icon of negative capability, the imagination's ability to create: "Caliban plays a highly Romantic role performing, rather than attempting to represent, the sublime."<sup>22</sup> For Cappeluti, it is the peculiar nature of the thing performed that brings about the peculiar nature of Caliban's performance: "One cannot demonstrate the imagination in the act of creating. By necessity, then, Auden's

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<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan? Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Cappeluti, "Caliban to the Audience," 564.

poetry is abstract drama, all action only implied.”<sup>23</sup> The difference between these positions is not small—it is nothing less than that between Romanticism and anti-Romanticism—between a sublime and a deflationary view of poetic imagination.

But though the nature of poetry is certainly at stake, I am not convinced that Caliban is principally concerned with the imagination, whether its limits or its powers. The debate between romantics and anti-romantics is thus in a way beside the point. Just as Jones worried about what he called “conventional susceptibilities” (xii), Auden’s question is in large part one, not of power, but of tact. Caliban’s echo begins with the audience:

*We must own [for the present I speak to your echo] to a nervous perplexity not unmixed, frankly, with downright resentment. How can we grant the indulgence for which in his epilogue your personified type of the creative so lamely, tamely pleaded? Imprisoned, by you, in the mood doubtful, loaded, by you, with distressing embarrassments, we are, we submit, in no position to set anyone free. (27)*

Caliban’s ventriloquizing of our embarrassment is not mere mockery, perpetuating the war of artist against audience. If, however, we expect Caliban’s response to demonstrate for us that we ought to applaud after all, we will be sorely disappointed. Caliban’s task, as he understands it, is rather to explain what, if not to earn our applause, art is for. Why should we pay attention to works of art, if not because they bring us enjoyment, or because they aid in a particular political cause, or because they are monumental achievements? Why should we attend to Miranda’s dance if we cannot live within it? Like Antonio’s refrains in Chapter II, the question directly challenges the self-abnegating Prospero both of *The Tempest* and of Chapter I of “The Sea and the Mirror.” But the nature of Caliban’s challenge is new: as Bonnie Costello puts it, “it is the otherness not of an antagonist but of the audience [...] Caliban’s address insists on

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<sup>23</sup> Cappeluti, “The Caliban Beneath the Skin,” 123.



audience, treating it as an unavowed community, not conforming to fixed traditions or goals, complex and divided in relation to society, yet forming a pluralizing unit.”<sup>24</sup> Caliban takes our embarrassment, not as an embarrassment to the true aims of art to be explained away, but as a clue to the real nature of the artist-audience relationship, and to the way in which an artwork can acknowledge this unavowed community.

Embarrassment therefore returns at the end of Caliban’s speech as the cornerstone of his aesthetic theory. He here admits that the embarrassment is not only on the part of the audience, but also on that of the actors: “Here we really stand, down stage with red faces and no applause; no effect, however simple, no piece of business, however unimportant, came off” (52). (We should remember here Jones’s description of himself as “a knocker-over of piles, a parade’s despair.”) These mistakes, for Caliban, produce the moments where we see that art cannot, for all its promises, offer us a total vision of reality. Yet, in an abrupt reversal, these moments of failure somehow also lead into just those moments of vision which they fail to produce: “it is at this moment that for the first time in our lives we hear, not the sounds which, as born actors, we have hitherto condescended to use as an excellent vehicle for displaying our personalities and looks, but the real Word which is our only *raison d’être*” (52). The divine Word emerges out of the failure of our human words, which are inescapably the words of actors. The purpose of art is merely to make their falseness visible, common knowledge. Such visibility is embarrassing but also revelatory.

What has been revealed is not any particularly embarrassing action each of us has performed, but rather a quality of “everything,” all of our actions, namely, that they are capable

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<sup>24</sup> Costello, *The Plural of Us*, 137.

of causing embarrassment—they are public, open to our judgment. Importantly, the plural pronoun here does not pit the actors of *The Tempest* or of “The Sea and the Mirror” against the audience, but rather places us all in the same boat. Caliban uses the first person singular for the last time two pages before the end of his speech, by way of explaining his subsequent adoption of the first-person plural: “Our performance—for Ariel and I are, you know this now, just as deeply involved as any of you—which we were obliged, all of us, to go on with and sit right through to the final dissonant chord, has been so indescribably inexcusably awful” (51). We see this involvement in the 145-word sentence at the heart of Caliban’s closing paragraph:

Not that we have improved; everything, the massacres, the whippings, the lies, the twaddle, and all their carbon copies are still present, more obviously than ever; nothing has been reconstructed; our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve, are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have; only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch—we understand them at last—are feebly figurative signs, so that all our meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgment that we can positively envision Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours. (52)

It is worth emphasizing a subtle distinction in the uses Caliban makes of “we” and “our.” On the one hand, we have phrases like “our meanings,” and the list of “everything, the massacres, the whippings,” *et cetera*: each of these items may belong to each of us, but they do not belong to all of us together. As the metaphor of “carbon copies” suggests, we each possess our own individual experiences and sense of their significance. But this is before they pass through “our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch.” Those fissures are plural, too, but their “our” is not separate; we possess in common all the various works of art that inhabit our lives. In possessing them, Caliban suggests, what we possess is only “our shame, our fear, our

incorrigible staginess”—note that this shame, this fear, is not individualized, but shared between us—“only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed.” Art returns to us our experiences, our torturous embarrassments, but makes them all of ours, and in doing so blesses us.

For Caliban, the transformations enacted by the plural fissures of artworks are “feebly figurative signs” for the greater transformation enacted by the singular “gulf” between justice and mercy, between our and “that Wholly Other Life” with its dramatic capital letters, between our works and “the perfected Work that is not ours.” These circumlocutions hint at theological claims, but it is significant that the claims are not made explicitly. As with the final parenthesis of Jones’s preface, the point is not what lies beyond so much as the fact that our existence is metaphysically subordinated to it, and that this subordination mirrors that of art to ourselves. The logic of Jones’s triple parentheses reappears in that of Caliban’s twin chasms, which we can schematize as follows:

OUR [VARIOUS] EVERYTHING[S]  
FISSURES  
OUR [SHARED] JUDGMENTS  
GULF  
NOT-OUR WORK OF MERCY

For Jones, our private experiences are reshaped into personal artworks, which become patient of communal appraisal, which will be judged in the wholly unknown life to come. For Auden, our various everythings pass through the fissure of art to become patient of shared judgments, which pass across the gulf of death to find mercy in the work which is Not Ours.

The correspondence is not, the reader will notice, exact. For Auden, the artwork is not to be considered analogous to the other three, but rather along with the “gulf” of death

establishes the analogy itself. Auden is less confident than Jones that an artwork is a thing rather than an activity—though we should notice that Jones, too, emphasizes that his book is something “you turn aside to do,” so this difference may be less significant than it at first appears. Second, and more importantly, for Jones the key actions involved in the making and sharing of art were the synonyms “appraise” and “appreciate,” while for Auden they are the starkly opposed “judgment” and “mercy.” This is to say that Jones had emphasized the similarity between the different levels of the analogy, while Auden emphasizes the distinctions, even the reversals. Even Auden, though, aims at a reconciliation of judgment and mercy: judgment becomes mercy with just as much, but no more, difficulty as judgment itself emerges from the things judged. Auden’s mercy is not impersonal so much as superpersonal, uniting our shared judgment in a way somehow analogous to how that judgment, arrived at through a shared encounter with an artwork, unites the various things in our various lives.

Though we shouldn’t reduce the similarity between Jones and Auden’s accounts of artistic judgment to Shakespeare’s famous dictum that “all the world’s a stage,” the theme is certainly one they share. Just as Jones quoted Shakespeare’s question “or may we cram | Within this wooden O,” so Auden (through Caliban) gropes about for a metaphor that can do justice to our sense of life’s theatricality, and arrives at one quite similar:

Beating about for some large loose image to define the original drama which aroused his imitative passion, the first performance in which the players were their own audience, the worldly stage on which their behaving flesh was really sore and sorry—for the floods of tears were not caused by onions, the deformities and wounds did not come off after a good wash, the self-stabbed heroine could not pick herself up again to make a gracious bow nor her seducer go demurely home to his plain and middle-aged spouse—the fancy immediately flushed is of the greatest grandest opera rendered by a very provincial touring company indeed. (51)

Caliban's point at first seems to be the superiority of reality over artifice, of original over imitation. A performance in which tears are real tears, and deaths are real deaths, would, one would think, be the greatest performance imaginable. By the end of the paragraph, however, all this has been turned on its head. Real life may be "the greatest grandest opera," but it is "rendered by a very provincial touring company," which is to say that real life is not real at all, but only itself an imitation, and a poor one, of some higher reality still, and a higher reality which is somehow itself artificial. We get from the one thought to the other through a peculiar digression set off in em-dashes. This digression purports to prove the comparative reality of the worldly stage through a series of negations: the sorrows and sufferings and deaths and sins are not fake, as they would be in a performance. At the same time, however, the digression suggests that what happens on the worldly stage itself falls short of reality. Unlike the world of opera, in which people sorrow and suffer and die and sin, the world of life is one in which people eat onions, bathe, trip, and "go demurely home to his plain and middle-aged spouse." Opera, and artifice in general, though itself less real than our real lives, shows us by analogy that our lives themselves are less real than whatever lies outside of them.

This belief in the suggestive power of artifice goes some way to explaining Caliban's overwrought prose style. Two stylistic features in particular are worth mentioning, both already exemplified by the passages quoted above. The first has to do with Caliban's imagery, which comes in two main modes. Sometimes Caliban presents images in such quick succession that we cannot take any one too seriously, but instead immediately ascend to the abstraction to which they refer: "the massacres, the whippings, the lies, the twaddle, and all their carbon copies." Even such potentially symbolist phrases as "the ruins and the bones," coming a few

lines after such a catalog, cannot thrill us in the usual poetic way, but achieve an effect closer to the comfortable aestheticism of the antique shop. No image remains itself, but becomes an example of a type. At other times, Caliban elaborately spins out quite ordinary scenes to characterize the various abstract spiritual relationships he describes: the cocktail party at which dark Reality made, “horror unspeakable, a pass” at the poetic Muse; the happily married provincial actors who fake their dramatic love affairs with onions and make-up. These mundane allegories erase any strong line we might want to draw between art and life. We already understand the dynamics of poetry if we understand the dynamics of everyday sociality, and, indeed, the former plays an essential role in the latter. In sum, Caliban’s imagery, like his theory of art itself, is grounded in common experience, and in the idea that unshared experiences can only be communicated in terms of what is shared.

Both the symbolist catalogs and the bourgeois allegories achieve their effect in large part by overloading our imaginations with endless detail. This brings us to the second feature of Caliban’s style I would highlight, his breathlessness. When Auden said that he modeled Caliban’s style on the late Henry James, he was referring in large part to Caliban’s interminable sentences: the 145-word example quoted earlier is not the longest, and Caliban’s average sentence, by my estimation, is 65 words long, far longer than in even the densest academic writing. James’s sentences took on this character in large part because he dictated them, and Auden’s pastiche of James similarly achieves an impression of spoken discourse. Even on re-reading, Caliban can strike us as an impossibly masterful improviser. On the one hand, his utterances are totally comprehensive, as if he has within a single sentence shown us every possible angle on the thing being described. On the other hand, the ultimate object of Caliban’s

attention is ourselves, and our relationship with the artwork, which is to say, with Caliban's speech itself. Hence we are left with a sense of bewilderment, as if, the sentence having covered all its bases, we have been left without any space in which to gather our thoughts. If Caliban has already anticipated every response we might want to make to his speech, and has calibrated his speech with those responses in mind, then it can feel as if no response could possibly be sufficient.

Now, the dangers of claims to poetic mastery are, as we saw in the last chapter, a theme throughout "The Sea and the Mirror," in particular with respect to Prospero, whose mastery exiles him from Miranda's circle. What, then, differentiates Caliban's mastery from that of his master? One way to approach this difference is to notice that Prospero comes at the beginning of "The Sea and the Mirror" and Caliban at the end, and that Prospero speaks in verse, Caliban in prose. Applying the scheme of nested parentheses sketches at the end of his address, we can say that while Prospero in Chapter I speaks as an individual poet, and the various lyrics in Chapter II stand as examples of poems, in Chapter III Caliban interprets poetry on all of our behalf. Prosperic poetic mastery exists, only it must be left behind if we are to pass from the realm of art to the realm of life. Calibanic interpretive mastery, on the other hand, does not exist save in an ironic mode—Caliban is not James, but a James *pastiche*. Caliban cannot be master because nothing he says can be the final word; we can never through our own actions cross the gulf from our shared judgments into the realm of divine mercy. While the poet (James, for example) arranges words so as to see through their separate subject matter, Caliban the interpreter already sees through us and himself, that is, sees our need for mercy, but can do nothing but endlessly report this judgment.

The expression of this ironic perception bears some relationship, in Auden's understanding, to religious discourse. In Auden's 1941 poem *New Year Letter* he confesses to having "adopted what I would disown | The preacher's loose immodest tone,"<sup>25</sup> and this confession could almost have referred proleptically to Caliban's address. Yet when read in this way it seems less a confession than a confirmation. The complex tonality of Caliban's address is not something for which Auden feels compelled to ask forgiveness, even if Caliban himself seeks simultaneously to own and disown his own rhetoric, prefacing his quest for the "large loose image" (51) with mockery of his own impulse "to raise the admonitory forefinger, to ring the alarming bell" (49). If the ironic distance Caliban maintains from his own evangelical tone prevents us from identifying him—or Auden, whose mouthpiece he is—as a spokesman for religious truth, still his address suggests a way to understand the relationship Auden draws between poetry and religion. For Auden, our judgments of one another's works picture God's judgment of ourselves. They do not, however, shape it: poetry and the reading of poetry save neither author nor audience. As Lucy McDiarmid puts it, Caliban's "soliloquy is a sermon manqué; no one is listening, no one is speaking."<sup>26</sup> The address offers a picture of what interpretation will end up looking like, but not one we can inhabit.

We are used by now to the differences between the prose of Auden and that of David Jones, but I want to close this section by pointing out a hitherto unremarked similarity. If Auden's prose tends towards the evangelical, Jones's tends towards the eremetical. Far from bombastic, Jones's prose in the preface is cautious, even embarrassed, always disclaiming any

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<sup>25</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 204.

<sup>26</sup> McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, 33.



theological or philosophical understanding, and given to careful elaboration and qualification of what theoretical points it does make. Yet like Auden's it is disposed toward run-on sentences and the accumulation of detail, and like Auden's it calculates these procedures to convince us of its interpretive mastery and hence authority. My association of these qualities with the figure of the hermit is based in part on the knowledge that Jones spent the last decades of his life as a semi-recluse to whose bedroom acquaintances would make quasi-pilgrimages (after one such a visit, Igor Stravinsky described seeing Jones as "like visiting a holy man in his cell"<sup>27</sup>). But we do not need this biographical detail to see that Jones as well as Auden establishes his interpretive (which is not to say poetic) authority as a parody of religious authority, only transposing the target of the parody from the pulpit to the narrow cell.

The evangelist and the hermit are particularly susceptible of such ironization because they are themselves already exemplars of exaggerated religiosity. Auden's evangelist leaves behind institutional religion and makes immodest claims for his own personal authority, his own access to revealed truth. Jones's hermit adopts an extreme modesty toward personal authority, one which makes him reluctant even to become institutional religion's representative. In their original contexts the evangelist's immodesty and the hermit's modesty have their own proper significance. In the context of poetic interpretation, however, exaggerated modesty and exaggerated immodesty alike serve to cast a veil over the speaker's desire to appear—not to appear important, or insightful, but simply to appear at all. The veil simultaneously calls attention to these rhetorical personae's desire to appear and erase its particularity, suggesting that it is not a fact about the speaker so much as a fact about human beings in general. In sum,

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<sup>27</sup> Dilworth, *David Jones*, 322.

the hyper-modest and hyper-immodest prose styles of Jones's preface and Auden's Caliban speech reveal a painfully heightened awareness that exposure to judgment is a precondition for membership in the community of judges, which is just the community of human beings. We cannot appreciate poetry without ourselves submitting to appraisal; we cannot choose without acknowledging that others have the power not to choose us. We cannot establish a poetic kingdom independent of the human realm.

### 3. Conclusion: Experience and Understanding

I have argued that, for Jones and Auden both, poetry exists on the border between solitary, uninterpreted experience and communal understanding; or, better, poetry is the movement across this border. This movement does not take place through the application to experience of an abstract cosmic order—not because such orders are bad (both Jones and Auden continuously inhabit them), but because they are not the particular concern of the poet *qua* poet. Poetry does not offer a schematic for a peaceful community, but rather an image of the kind of thing—the human person—that inhabits communities peaceful or not, and constitutes such communities through its valuing and being evaluated.

What, then, of the bower of the Queen of the Woods, or Miranda's high green hill by the sea? These pastoral scenes do not suggest that the various characters have in the end been united in a peaceful community. Rather the opposite is the case: the peace adjudicated by these women stands at the limit point of a poetic form of life immanently defined by an accumulation of fratricides. Like much pastoral, these scenes are elegiac. The Queen and Miranda do not draw the various characters of these books into a unity, but rather offer assurance that they

have judged them all to have something in common. This “something” which remains not only unclear, but defined by its lack of clarity, for it is not any particular fact about their experiences but only the fact that they have them, whatever they end up meaning. We might say, if we wanted again to echo the Kantian formula, that we have here a judgment of substantial likeness without any substance. What the various figures share is not any specific feature, but rather the potential to participate in the skein of poetic allusions and quotations which accumulate around their various private experiences.

The skein here is the skein of poetic tradition. It is worth contrasting how *In Parenthesis* and “The Sea and the Mirror” picture this tradition with the images favored in Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” For Eliot, both the relation of poetry to private experience, and the relation of poetry to communal understanding, are imagined in terms of impersonal matter. Poetic creation takes place through catalytic reaction: “the mind of the poet is the shred of platinum.”<sup>28</sup> The poem takes its place through monumental geometry:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.<sup>29</sup>

For Jones and Auden, in contrast, the relations are personal. Poetry comes into being not through catalysis, but through the poet playing for the Welsh queen, or through a provincial opera performance. The order that results from poetry is just as uncanny as Eliot’s—and the image of stone tables moving under their own power bears a certain resemblance to Jones’s

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<sup>28</sup> Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

bright boughs moving into place among the statue-like fallen soldiers, and to Auden's dancing circle of eyes and pebbles—but it is governed not by laws, but by Miranda or the Queen. Further, the processions of these latter figures picture not what aesthetic history looks like while ongoing, but rather what personal histories look like when they come to a close. Their ongoing history does not receive an image because it has no form besides that given it by the nesting parentheses of interpretation. Finally, for Eliot, the introduction of the “really new” work rearranges the others through the application of something like magnetic lines of force. In the parenthetical model, the new work rearranges the old order by placing it within parentheses, which is to say, by representing it to itself.

This parenthetical entwining has less to do with Eliot than with Coleridge (as Jones's and Auden's prose styles are less Eliotic than Coleridgean). With Coleridge, these poets would say that “parentheses are the *drama* of Reason—& present the thought growing, instead of a mere Hortus siccus.”<sup>30</sup> The structural parentheses of *In Parenthesis* and “The Sea and the Mirror” picture this growth of thought from experience to artwork to judgment. Further, Jones and Auden would say with Coleridge that this drama of reason has a direction, and that it points not towards itself (“an ideal order among themselves”) but rather towards the possibility of human community. As Coleridge puts it, “the circle is completing; the idea is coming round to, and to be, common sense.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Coleridge, *Collected Letters* III:282. I discovered this passage and the next quoted in Geoffrey Hill's essay “Redeeming the Time.” Hill associates the drama of reason with the phrase “the antiphonal voice of the heckler” (Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 94). The audience in Jones and Auden does not heckle, but these authors do try to give it a chance to speak: think of Jones singing any song we choose to hear, or of Auden's Caliban ventriloquizing our objections to the play.

<sup>31</sup> *Table Talk*, 28 June 1834. Coleridge, *Collected Works*, 14:1.492.

## CHAPTER 6: TO CEASE FROM MENTAL FIGHT

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:  
Bring me my arrows of desire:  
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In Englands green & pleasant Land.

William Blake, Preface to *Milton*<sup>1</sup>

Though we do not expect David Jones to have much in common with his romantic poet-artist predecessor, his vision of the poetic struggle is at times almost Blakean, as in this sentence from his 1942–43 essay “Art and Democracy”:

[Man’s] tools were, from the word “go,” symbols of the extension of his *imperium* as Man, and his “art” in general is the common activity whereby he conquers a domain extending not only over material but over spirit; if over the one then necessarily over the other, because man is a “borderer,” he is the sole inhabitant of a tract of country where matter marches with spirit, so that whatever he does, good or bad, affects the economy of those two domains.<sup>2</sup>

Where Blake speaks of “England’s green & pleasant Land,” Jones speaks of “a tract of country where matter marches with spirit”; where Blake fights to build Jerusalem, Jones extends Man’s *imperium*. And for both poets, the personages involved equivocate between singular and plural: *I* will fight until *we* have built Jerusalem; man is the *sole* inhabitant yet art is the *common*, which is to say shared, activity. For both poets, the poet’s struggle is in some sense a struggle for community.

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Poems*, 162.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 86.

These equivocations, however, move in different directions, and suggest different evaluations of poetry's political potential. For Blake, the heroic poet commits himself to the fight and through that fight invents his compatriots. This fight is poetry, and poetry is this fight: in the words of a modern-day Blakean, Allen Grossman, "All warfare is struggle for control of the unalterable logic of manifestation."<sup>3</sup> For Jones, in contrast, whatever political significance poetry possesses is located not in any one poet's achievement (Jones makes no use here of the first person), but in the mere fact of poetry as a human activity: "Men are equal in the sense that they are equally judged to be men because all *behave* as artists."<sup>4</sup> As Auden also understood, to imagine the poet as founding hero tends to justify the kind of poetomachies discussed in Chapter Four, for it suggests that the enemy poet is no poet at all, no builder of Jerusalem, but rather a kind of anti-poet against whom the poetic sword should not sleep. Conversely, to judge the poet to be another human being tends to discourage poetomachy, directing the poet to fight not against other poets, but rather for them, to keep their achievement circulating within the economy of matter and spirit.

Most intra-poetic fights take place before the Blakean clouds unfold; for example, the varying interpretations we saw in Chapter Three of Coleridge's "I blessed them unaware" conflict with one another only by insinuation, and perhaps not intentionally. This chapter will look instead to what happens when the brilliantly burning bow, spear, and chariot come out, and poets explicitly identify the poetic targets of their ire. It is in these moments when the political implications of poetic struggle become unavoidable, for we see here, not the forms of

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<sup>3</sup> Grossman, *True-Love*, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 86.

community poets claim to seek, but those toward which their activities actually tend. Our survey will divide into three interconnected case studies. The subject matter of the first two in a way recapitulates from a different angle that of Chapters Two and Three, while the third recapitulates the argument of the dissertation as a whole.

In the first section we will look again at two lyrics of the romantic landscape, these written by two poets to whom our two titular figures are often compared, Wilfred Owen and W. B. Yeats. These poets enter straightforwardly into the Bloomian *agon*, and so provide a model for how different artworks can find themselves locked in mortal conflict, each seeking to exile the other from the aesthetic world; for how the artist can erase the humanity of his audience and seek to transform them into extensions of himself; and for how art can seek to murder religion and take its place. These poets' critiques of one another, I will argue (with some help from Coleridge), reveal them to be indistinguishable with respect to their perpetration of poetic violence.

In the second section we will consider a third poet with whom our titular figures are often triangulated, T. S. Eliot, and his own version of ritual drama, which hopes to escape poetic (and political) hypocrisy through religious devotion. His play *Murder in the Cathedral* would have us imitate its negation of its own dramatic digression in favor of a final religious unity. But as Jeffrey Perl argues (in an excellent book which could well have been titled *T. S. Eliot and Poetic Fratricide*), such ascetic surrender cannot bring about poetic peace, for the relevant conflict lies not merely between poet and tradition, related as part to whole, but also

between rival poets and between rival traditions, related to one another in historical sequence, as elder or younger siblings.<sup>5</sup>

The third section will look at Jones's and Auden's attempts to avoid following Eliot, Yeats, and Owen into intra-poetic warfare by subordinating imagination to judgment. I engage here again with the arguments of Chapters Two and Three, and put into critical practice the poetic ideals discussed in Chapters Four and Five. We will first see how Jones's and Auden's poetics of interpretation differed from Eliot's poetics of martyrdom. Rather than negate their own natures, they sought through their poetry to acknowledge their own limitations: their inadequacy as a source of religious meaning, their separation from other persons, their existence alongside alternate modes of poetry; in a word, their historical contingency. We will then see how this poetics offered Jones and Auden an alternative to Owen and Yeats's claims of cultural authority, an alternative that involved not positing an alternative authority but rather demonstrating an exemplary vulnerability.

### 1. Prophecies of War in Wilfred Owen and W. B. Yeats

To witness the workings of intra-poetic violence one could do worse than to begin with the soldier-poet Wilfred Owen. His statement of authorial principles famously asserts the need for a decisive shift in how we imagine war. The old poetry glorifying a warrior culture was responsible for untold deaths in the trenches of the Great War, but Owen's poetry will be different<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity* especially 6, 38–40.

<sup>6</sup> Owen, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 192.



This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.  
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty,  
dominion, or power, except War.  
Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.  
My subject is War, and the pity of War.  
The Poetry is in the pity.  
Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the  
next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.  
(If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if  
the spirit of it survives—survives Prussia—my ambition and those names will be  
content; for they will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders....)

The moral force of Owen's words here is undeniable, and I do not intend to deny it.

Nevertheless, we might legitimately wonder whether Owen's convictions regarding content—  
what English poetry is “fit to speak of,” namely, *not* great deeds of violence—can really  
translate so smoothly into his prescription regarding form—what “the Poetry is in,” namely, *not*  
present consolation.

Tracing the dialectical relationship envisioned here between poetry and violence turns  
out to be more difficult than one might have supposed.<sup>7</sup> Owen begins, it would seem, by  
rejecting the first term in favor of the second, stripping from his book all of poetry's usual  
subject matter until, finally and most brutally, he severs it from poetry itself, leaving only war,  
that is, the cause of suffering, and pity, our relation to others' suffering: “I am not concerned  
with Poetry. | My subject is War, and the Pity of War.” Immediately, however, Owen reverses  
himself, transforming his rejection of poetry into a definition for it: “The Poetry is in the pity.”  
From this point forward it is pity, not poetry, which drops out, subsumed into its par rhyme, as  
over a few short sentences Owen offers a program for both. The poet of today, Owen goes on to

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<sup>7</sup> As Desmond Graham put it, “we tend to read Owen slackly, assuming that we already know  
what he is saying” (*The Truth of War*, 24)

proclaim, *warns* this generation about the realities of *war* (note again the aural repetition) by speaking truthfully. The truth Owen has in mind here is not of the “letter,” but of the “spirit,” which is to say that the warning he offers is not practical (“you are in danger”) so much as prophetic (“you have sinned”).

The resulting poetic form Owen envisions is curiously ambivalent: if its warning is heeded, poetry will no longer be required to offer it, and it can become an elegy. But so long as suffering continues, Owen implies, it will remain inappropriate for a poet to be *concerned* with *consolatory* poetry. The Latinate terms invite an etymological dissection: the poet must avoid bringing us together (“con-”) by sifting (“-cern”) and soothing (“-sole”), that is, through an application of reason and a calming of the passions. Instead, he must adopt a stance of righteous indignation. This indignation restricts poetry’s freedom: it becomes “All” poetry can do. But the reduction of scope is felt as an expansion of power. The new poetry has gained authority through a predication which hovers between describing and prescribing: “the true Poets,” with a capital *P*, must be those who “must be truthful.” Our attention is drawn away from the aesthetic object to the performance of passionate moral conviction. Owen ends by suggesting that, if his book succeeds in this performance, both it and the soldiers it writes about—“my ambition and those names”—will have “achieved themselves fresher fields” than the conventional heroes buried in Flanders. His book is about heroes after all, and above all the heroic poet himself, who will heroically perform his task of piteous warning until war and suffering have ceased, at which point his silent, unnamed fellow soldiers will celebrate his victory.

Owen died November 4, 1918, his book and its preface unpublished. The Great War ended a week later. Though Owen's work soon saw publication, his hope that his poems of warning would for the next generation become elegies was quickly disappointed. Instead, the 1930s saw a new crop of *poètes engagés* take as their motto Owen's "All a poet can do today is warn," "today" simply translated two decades into the future.<sup>8</sup> The strongest poetic voice to oppose Owen's self-proclaimed disciples came from the generation preceding, in the form of W.B. Yeats's editorship of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, and it is to Yeats's response to Owen that I now turn.

Yeats purposefully excluded from his anthology almost all of the poems written during the Great War. This decision incurred and continues to incur near-universal censure; even Geoffrey Hill, whose own critique of Owen's preface is strongly Yeatsian, called the anthology "lunatic."<sup>9</sup> But however frivolous we find Yeats's inclusion of private relations like Margot Ruddock, his exclusion of soldier-poets like Owen was seriously considered and deserves serious consideration. In the introduction he offered this explanation:

The writers of these poems were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity, one a man constantly selected for dangerous work, all, I think, had the Military Cross; their letters are vivid and humorous, they were not without joy—for all skill is joyful—but felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his "Empedocles on Etna" from circulation: passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For the so-called Auden generation, Owen became, in the words of Samuel Hynes, "a sort of martyred saint" to whom they looked in their responses, not to the Great War, but to the *next* War everyone expected (Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 23).

<sup>9</sup> Hill, "Mine Angry and Defrauded Young."

<sup>10</sup> Yeats, *Collected Works* V:199.

This passage quite carefully reverses the logic of Owen's preface. Not, I hasten to add, intentionally, but also not coincidentally: though Yeats does not respond directly to Owen's claims about his poetry, he does respond to Owen's poetry itself, about whose operation, as we will see later, Owen gave an accurate account.

The inversion is recognizable from Yeats's very first sentence. Yeats begins by emphasizing what Owen refused to discuss, the conventional heroism of the soldier-poets. Then, with the semicolon after "Military Cross," Yeats leads us to associate this heroism with his proposed alternative to "War, and the pity of War," namely "joy—all skill is joyful." He goes on to recognize that the war poets sought, for moral reasons, to address their audience and provoke a response, but he demotes this address from the authoritative "warn" of Owen's preface to the more pathetic "plead" of his letters,<sup>11</sup> and so insists that even an adversarial address to an audience entails submission to the latter's power. The moralistic heroism of the *poète engagé* is no heroism at all, being unable to command assent. True authority, Yeats holds, derives only from a rejection of the audience's claim upon the poet, which in turn requires setting aside the "first person" of the *poet* in favor of what Owen rejected, impersonal *poetry*. Against Owen's claim that "English poetry is not yet fit to speak of [heroes]," Yeats declares that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry," bolstering his assertion with an appeal to that very English poet Matthew Arnold. Finally, where Owens links poetry, pity, poets, and truth,

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<sup>11</sup> Letter 662, October 4th–5th, 1918: "I came out in order to help these boys—directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can" (Owen, *Collected Letters*, 580).

Yeats offers tragedy, joy, man, and death, linked together in a quasi-Nietzschean alternative to philosophical truth-mongering.<sup>12</sup>

The recurrence of “joy” in the final sentence, however, recalls the joyfully skilled language of the “vivid and humorous” letters, and so prevents us from thinking the soldier-poet to have been set aside entirely. Rather, Yeats has called on would-be pleaders of truth instead to transform themselves into tragic hero-poets, willing to die into their art. Such a transformation will in turn transform the present age, an age when the war’s pseudo-poetry could have “for a time considerable fame,” into “Greece” reborn. This imagined world of a united community dancing around the joyful dying poet offers an unexpected renovation of the soldier-poets’ original desire, misapplied but not entirely mistaken, to make “the suffering of their men” “their own.” In sum, though Yeats appeals to ecstasy (joy and death) and nostalgia (Greece), where Owen appeals to ethics (pity and truth) and progress (the next generation), both insist that the poetry of the present age has failed to live up to the demands which knowledge of suffering places on the poet. Both respond with a prescription for the would-be poet (Yeats insists on skill, Owen on warning), and proceed to imagine a world, less past or future than altogether elsewhere, in which, that prescription having been followed, the poet’s auditors would be subordinated to him by the power of his poetry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A good account of Yeats’s interest in Nietzsche can be found in the introduction to Bell, *Yeats and the Logic of Formalism*.

<sup>13</sup> Subsequent to writing this final sentence I encountered the following, in which Oren Izenberg makes quite similar claims about a different Yeats poem: “The poem, that is, imagines that there could be some act of mind in which an image of a perfected state (whether past or to come—but certainly ‘other’) might change ‘us’—not as a reader is changed by what she reads, but as the stroke of a pen changes a poem into the poem it was all along”, (Izenberg, *Being Numerous*, 43). I preserve this coincidence here as a striking instance of critical convergence.

It is strange, of course, to claim an affinity between Yeats and Owen's sense of what poetry *does* (though Owen's formal debt to the early Yeats is well known<sup>14</sup>). It would be more usual to say that the one valued truth, the other beauty, or else, using somewhat more sophisticated critical vocabulary, to say that Yeats's proto-fascistic poetry aestheticized politics, while Owen's quasi-revolutionary writing brought politics into art.<sup>15</sup> And indeed, such has been the tenor of the most nuanced discussions of the *Anthology* controversy.<sup>16</sup> But any such dichotomy—even if not rendered void by the pesky “proto” and “quasi”—presupposes a shared definition of “aesthetics” and “politics.” Here we discover common ground. For these two poets—though neither would have put it this way<sup>17</sup>—aesthetics means a Romantic lyrical poetics based on the contagion of extreme affect, and politics means a program for the restructuring of the polity which the poet aims, not merely to embed within the affect, but to make coextensive with it, thereby achieving the square circle of intellectual intuition. Whether “politics” or “aesthetics” holds the reins may determine the content of Owen's and Yeats's poetry, but it does not determine the mode of its poetic aspirations.

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<sup>14</sup> See Stallworthy, “W.B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen.”

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 242.

<sup>16</sup> For example, to draw from three successive eras of critical discourse, the politics–aesthetics polarity is the main note in Cohen, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats—And Wilfred Owen,” Raveendran, “Poetry and Politics,” and Allison, “War, Passive Suffering, and the Poet.” Recent approaches via cultural history offer complications on the same theme, as in Winter, “Beyond Glory.” Mostly, of course, critics either take for granted that Owen or, more rarely, Yeats, had the better of the argument, or merely note the conflict and more on. Edna Longley observes perceptively that Owen was “broadly on Yeats's formal wavelength,” and that Yeats engaged in “complex denials” of this fact, but she describes neither the wavelength nor the denials in great detail. See Longley, “The Great War, History, and the English Lyric,” 76.

<sup>17</sup> A near-contemporary who almost did put it this way was Leo Tolstoy; see Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*

To understand that mode, we require a different set of terms than “politics” and “aesthetics.” Samuel Hynes points us in the right direction when he observes that, faced with the poets of the Great War, Yeats “den[ie]d the validity of their vision by a willful act of his own.”<sup>18</sup> I would add only that the converse is also true—the soldier poet’s act of denial was equally willful; and that the key terms in Hynes’s sentence are the plural possessive pronoun “their,” the singular “his,” and the common object of these two, “vision.” Both Owen and Yeats’s war poetry, especially that poetry which most fully realizes their theoretical goals, centers on a clash of visions, the true vision of the poet versus the false vision of the audience. This emphasis on vision leads to a peculiar understanding of both the individual poem, and the idea of a poetic tradition.

Set one of Owen’s most famous poems, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” alongside one of Yeats’s most famous, “Lapis Lazuli.” Owen’s poem is, of course, an act of political opposition to the literal war of soldier against soldier, the world in which “I saw him drowning.”<sup>19</sup> But it is also an attempt to wage, in the place of this war, a figurative war of poet against audience, in which dreams of the dead soldier “plung[ing] at me, guttering, choking, drowning,” become Owen’s weapon of choice. Jahan Ramazani describes the situation well: Owen “appropriates the anger initially directed at himself and turns it outward, transforming masochistic self-reproach

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<sup>18</sup> Hynes, “Yeats’s Wars,” 53.

<sup>19</sup> Owen, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 117. I have found several recent critical works helpful in my approach to Owen’s poem, including Das, “War Poetry and the Realm of the Senses” and Campbell, *Oscar Wilde, Wilfred Owen, and Male Desire*. Unfortunately, much of even the most sophisticated writing about Owen, such as Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* and Kerr, *Wilfred Owen’s Voices*, tends to uncritically endorse Owen’s political epistemology rather than give an account of it. James Campbell helpfully diagnoses this tendency in “Combat Gnosticism.”

into a sadistic attack on the civilian reader.”<sup>20</sup> Yeats’s political views are quite different from those of Owen, making his use of poetic violence less self-contradictory, though not less self-stultifying. He takes as a given the impersonal visionary truth that “all things fall and are built again,” and insists that “those who build them again are gay” because indifferent to how they fall upon their audience.<sup>21</sup> Whatever their differences, both poems attempt to escape their history and to dominate their readers by effecting in them something like a forced conversion. Further, both poems recognize the impossibility of success in such an endeavor, and yet, through a kind of nihilism, persist in the attempt.

Both poems motivate their attacks on the reader with reference to the reader’s presumed reliance on cultural clichés, which is to say, on the words of other writers. Owen’s “the old Lie” refers to the Latin poetry learned by rote in English public schools; when Yeats speaks of what “everyone knows or else should know,” he has in mind what he might have called the New Lie

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<sup>20</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> Yeats, *Collected Works*, I:300–302. As Vereen Bell writes, the builders are gay “because they are no longer in life but in art [...] an alternative version of reality that Yeats plainly declares to be one of his own imposing” (*Yeats and the Logic of Formalism*, 23). My reading of “Lapis Lazuli” is consonant with this view of the poem’s rhetorical imposition. It differs at least in emphasis from those, such as James Longenbach, who find in the poem almost a kind of modesty, as “Yeats resists the temptation to [...] direct action” and constructs only a modest “‘half-way house’, a place where [the ‘Chinamen’] cannot remain forever” (*Stone Cottage*, 268). It is worth remarking here that, though it is a crucial question for understanding Yeats, it does not affect my argument whether we understand the impersonality of this vision to be transcendently mystical or immanently pagan—whether the poem’s violence reveals “all things” to be, as David Soud would have it, “perfect parts of a divine whole” (*Divine Cartographies*, 95), or rather, as Matthew Mutter argues, it shows them as “a site of unending conflict” (*Restless Secularism*, 150). The content of the vision is less important than the fact that it *is* a vision, and that, as David Rosen observes, it nevertheless acquires immediate political significance: “the Yeats of 1919-1939 is remarkably clear-eyed about violating the separation between his social and visionary sides” (*Plain English*, 106).



blaring from radio and newspaper. Whether too new or too old, the point is that these texts do not have the proper degree of presentness, but are mere text, mere letter, lacking poetic spirit. Owen attacks Horatian sentiments only as applied to the Great War: “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” may be in some sense true from a great temporal distance (hence Owen expects his poems may turn into consolatory elegies), but when brought in close the text causes a mismatch between what the soldiers expect war to be like, and what it turns out to be like. The “old Lie” is a lie *because*, being old, it turns the soldiers who believe it into “old beggars.” The writers Yeats mocks, similarly, are misguided not because war is not imminent—indeed, “all things fall and are built again”—but because they wrongly infer that this imminence obliges one to focus on preserving “old civilisations” rather than creating new art. What matters about the

handiwork of Callimachus  
Who handled marble as if it were bronze,  
Made draperies that seemed to rise  
When sea-wind swept the corner,

is not its historical fate, but the eternal present of its handling: it “stands” in imagination, and we almost forget that that these lines begin with “No.”<sup>22</sup> We might even imagine the literal absence of standing marbles to be an advantage, for if the material artifacts had survived the present world would care more about them than about Callimachus’s (and Yeats’s) precarious stance of artistic mastery.

Set against such immaterial monuments, the reader’s attachment to the poetic letter becomes a kind of passionate anti-poetry which the poem must defend against. Owen inveighs,

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<sup>22</sup> As Peter McDonald puts it, “the line allows the ghost of an assertion to materialize, as though something *does* stand here,” though not something solid or stable (McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, 66).

“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest”; Yeats meditates, “I have heard that hysterical women say.” We might note, parenthetically, the shared misogyny of these phrases, explicit in the “hysterical women,” only implicit in the anonymous “my friend” who speaks maternally to children but quite obvious in the earlier drafts addressed to “a certain Poetess.” Both poets conceive of the anti-poet, which is to say, the reader, as essentially feminine. The misogyny thus confirms what we already suspected, the existence of a metaphysical barrier preventing the reader from comprehending the poet’s message.<sup>23</sup> For Owen, the cliché would vanish *if* the audience could share the poet’s dream, but dreams, while they can be told, by definition cannot be shared. For Yeats, the “mournful music” which ought to replace hysteria exists only in a scene which “I | delight to imagine,” the enjambment emphasizing the first appearance of a first-person pronoun since the opening line of the poem. Nor will it do to say that the poem itself is the “smothering dream” or “tragic scene” made available to the audience. In their attitudes towards Horace and Callimachus, both poems have rejected the idea of an artwork as something the audience can take hold of and carry away and around with them. Rather than an object or an experience, both poems believe poetry to be, first, an activity immanent to the moment of artistic creation, and, second, a transcendent, autonomous whole, accessible only to the solitary creative agent. As a consequence, and in defiance of the obvious fact that they evoke in the reader powerful aesthetic experiences, these poems insist that the reader gets, can get, can be allowed to get nothing out of reading them.

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<sup>23</sup> James Campbell writes insightfully on the connections between soldiering, misogyny, and active skepticism, especially in Owen’s work, in Campbell, “Combat Gnosticism.”

This prohibition is more obvious with “Lapis Lazuli,” whose indifference towards the matter of the sculpture in favor of the sculptor’s handling we have already mentioned. We should note also how the (imagined) mournful melodies comprehend a scene, made up of “the mountain and the sky,” which is tragic because only given imaginative substance by “Every discolouration of the stone, | Every accidental crack or dent.” Even the speaker of the poem cannot receive the image of mountain and sky by considering the sculpture, but only by transforming its decay through what amounts to a new act of artistic creation. Nor does the musician, “doubtless a serving-man,” have any *effect* on the two auditors when he plays music for them:

There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

The music does not occasion the genesis of tragic gaiety in the eyes of the two “Chinamen” (“China” being this poem’s Orientalized version of the aesthetic otherworld, analogous to that discussed earlier under the title of “Greece”), but only its revelation. This revelation involves no interpersonal communication, but arises upon the request of an abstract “One” and emanates from instrumental “Accomplished fingers.” Whatever community these pilgrims inhabit exists already in the imaginary altogether-elsewhere.

The same, *mutatis mutandis*, goes for “Dulce et Decorum Est.” Not only does the poem relegate its scenario to a dream, and not only is this dream hypothetical, but even within this hypothetical dream the proposed poetics is hidden, “obscene as cancer,” while the dying

soldier, agent of the smothering and hence figure of the poet, is vivisected into eyes, face, and lungs until finally displaced for the even-more-unreal similitudinal “innocent tongues.” Rather than an attempt to communicate anything in particular, the smothering the soldier performs comprises a series of sub-voluntary gestures: “yelling,” “stumbling,” “flound’ring,” “guttering,” “choking,” “drowning,” “writhing,” “hanging,” “gargling.” These present participles/, which amount almost to active suffering, uncannily incarnate Owen’s theory of poetry as warning, as the “accomplished fingers” in “Lapis Lazuli” point to Yeats’s theory of poetry as skill. The same descent into active helplessness afflicts the speaker:

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If the “I” attempts to assert any agency, it quickly fails, falling back into the objective “me.” In doing so, it transforms the dying soldier from a possibly efficacious force external to the speaker to an expression of the speaker’s antecedent inner state: just as the speaker’s sight is helpless, so the soldier’s eyes are writhing.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the soldier’s death teaches his fellow-soldiers, it does not differ in kind from what they already know from their own experience of being thrown by the gas-attack into “an ecstasy of fumbling | fitting.” Their souls are already drawn out from their bodies and bound together in the shared death of that unfortunate whose helmet is not put on in time. The agent of the ecstasy is not the scene of that death, which is to say, is not any work of art, but rather is the obscenity of the gas, which sets all soldiers

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth mentioning here Santanu Das’s observation about how the present participles change as the poem develops from “visual impressions to visceral processes [...] from sounds produced between the body and the world [...] to sounds within the body” (“War Poetry and the Realm of the Senses,” 84).

invisibly apart from those unable to dream gas-dreams.

Both poems, in sum, understand poetry to be an expression of esoteric knowledge, knowledge which can be gestured at but (in some unspecified sense) cannot be communicated, being absolutely private. One can gain access to it only through finding oneself to be a soldier or a pilgrim, that is, through finding oneself a member of the elect (however horrific the means of election may be). We sometimes describe this situation as one of “paradoxical” communication, as if the poem communicates what cannot be communicated, or shows us what cannot be seen, allowing us to become spiritual soldiers or spiritual pilgrims. Or else, which amounts to much the same thing, we reductively describe this situation as an invocation of the “impossibility topos,” as if Owen and Yeats are emphasizing the impossibility of communication in order to impress us more effectively once communication is accomplished. But it would be more accurate to say that a poem such as “Dulce et Decorum Est” or “Lapis Lazuli” believes itself to communicate nothing besides the ethical-aesthetic judgment on which it so didactically insists. It does not, because it believes that it cannot, offer any grounds for that judgment. Though gesticulating vigorously, like a preacher pointing up at heaven, it does not do so in the direction of anything the reader can turn and see for herself.

Such communicative self-sabotage is not unique to Owen and Yeats. Indeed, one definition of Romanticism would be the impossible attempt to short-circuit intelligible communication via powerful expression. Compare, for example, the closing lines of the poems just considered with those of Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan”<sup>25</sup>:

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<sup>25</sup> Coleridge, *The Major Works*, 103–4.

And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

We have here the same analysis of the body into its component parts, emphasizing the flashing eyes; the same contagion linking the poet's eyes to those of the audience, which here close with holy dread; the same paradisa elsewhere. And, as in Owen's and Yeats's poems, these tropes concern, not the poem's purported subject matter, but the scene from which we are to see its poetic expression as having emerged.

This scene of poetic expression turns the poem on its head, alleging the impossibility of our having actually received what we think we have received, an intellectual intuition of the scene poetically expressed—of Kubla's pleasure dome, or the gas attack, or the movement of history.<sup>26</sup> The poem changes from a communication about a thing in the world into an image of expression itself. Coleridge's poem, like its titular character, "did ... | A stately pleasure dome decree," the movement of "Alph, the sacred river" laying down the erotic, turbulent law of the imagination. Similar acts of self-expressive imagination saturate Owen's and Yeats's poems: both the continuous "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning," and the habitual "All things fall and are built again," come to express their poems' formal movements, "Dulce et Decorum Est" sluggish and full of false starts, "Lapis Lazuli" bounding abruptly and assuredly

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<sup>26</sup> That Coleridge, at least, was concerned with the paradox of intellectual intuition is historically attested; cf. Hedley, "Coleridge's Intellectual Intuition, the Vision of God, and the Walled Garden of 'Kubla Khan'." For the less philosophical Owen and Yeats the concern may not have been conscious, but nevertheless, as I suggest in a previous footnote, the paradox is relevant and revelatory to these poems.

from one topic to another.<sup>27</sup> Such images, it must be stressed, do not function like an ordinary metaphor, linking two things in the world, but rather connect a thing in the world to the very act of imaginative expression with which the connection is drawn.

For Coleridge, however, war and art are incompatibles, and as soon as “Kubla heard from far | Ancestral voices prophesying war” the vision of the pleasure dome began to fade away.<sup>28</sup> These troubling lines’ anachronistic slant rhyme hints at a shift of theme from the play of poetic imagination to the role such imagination plays in mediating our response to others’ suffering. But it is merely a hint, and almost everything about this new theme is left unresolved: who are these ancestors? what relation have their voicings to Kubla’s own decrees? and what would be the fate of imagination if their prophecies came true? Coleridge offers no answer to these questions, and the reader finds it natural to suppress them, finding in the war, as in the preceding “tumult,” merely an image for the culmination and cessation of poetic imagining. In the final estimation, “Kubla Khan” is a poem of solitude, the vast pleasure dome it cannot quite bring before our eyes having not a single inhabitant. The poem ends with all who hear the hypothetical poet first participating in his vision, “see[ing] them there,” and then ritually acknowledging the barrier between them and the visionary, “weav[ing] a circle round him thrice.” If, *per impossibile*, the vision could truly be shared, it would reveal to the community the intrinsic worth of the visionary’s separateness.

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<sup>27</sup> As Edna Longley puts it, “Yeats ‘builds’ successive climaxes, which culminate in the crescendo of the last two lines” (*Yeats and Modern Poetry*, 65).

<sup>28</sup> On the theme of war in “Kubla Khan,” see Bright, “Most Capital Enemies of the Muses’,” who suggests that the poem sees peace as a necessary adjunct to cultural flourishing.

In Owen and Yeats, in contrast, forceful expression becomes mixed up with violent subject matter. Because both “Dulce et Decorum Est” and “Lapis Lazuli” hope to color our interpretations of actual historical events, and above all of actual military conflicts, in them the imagination becomes itself an image for the truth of war. The result is not solitude, but neither is it quite community. Both poems imagine a collapse of the metaphysical distance between persons, and imagine that only such a collapse could absolve the audience of their culpable ignorance. The poet, as they understand him, has already overcome this barrier through gaining access to some privileged vantage point: either intensity (Owen’s gas attack) or scope (Yeats’s mountain vista) has made it possible to see what is the otherwise “obscene,” off-stage, accessible only in the darkness of “all my dreams,” or else to see a “tragic scene” that cannot be contained by even “a hundred thousand stages,” unless it be a Shakespearean *theatrum mundi*. By subjecting the reader to an equally extreme experience, the poem hopes to impress her with a similar vision.

By “impress” here I intend the military as well as the affective sense. Receiving from the poem no clear communication, but impressed by its expressive force, the reader (as these poems envision her) finds herself impressed into the ranks of the poem’s elect, the group of those whose very being the poem expresses. At no point in this process does the poem offer its reader any description of its purpose or an application for membership. Before the impressment takes place, such would be impossible, and after it would be unnecessary, membership having already been accomplished by other means. Which is to say: neither “Dulce et Decorum Est” nor “Lapis Lazuli” believes itself to truthfully communicate what war is like. Rather, each makes an allegedly indescribable scene of war into an image of poetic imagination; then, each



makes the resulting imaginative mood, whether of stumbling pity or bounding joy, into a further image for the truth of war.<sup>29</sup>

The presence of a truth-claim in the second of these steps raises the question: can the claim be justified? Do these poems reveal to us the imaginative truth of war? This question differs from that of whether these poems possess artistic merit, which we can answer in the affirmative without thinking their authors to possess any great insight into anything besides the skillful arrangement of words of warning. It differs also from the question of whether these poems' projects of cultural reformation were successful, which we can, I suppose, answer in the negative, given that both "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Lapis Lazuli" have achieved commonplace status while high zest and hysteria remain rampant. What we want to know is whether these physicians of poetry have succeeded in healing themselves, or whether they are doomed to perpetuate the very conditions, in both poetry and politics, which they claim to oppose. My answer at this point should not be surprising. The very fact of the similarity described above, given the incompatibility of Owen's and Yeats's visions, suggests to me that the second alternative must obtain.

Both of these poems offer their audience a powerful imaginative experience, and both claim an identity between that experience and the meaning of war, such that for either to succeed would be for it to determine, whether through direct confrontation (Owen) or indirect mastery (Yeats), what its audience believed war to consist in (namely, direct confrontation or

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<sup>29</sup> On the work of art as an oppressive and impressive presence, see Fried, "Art and Objecthood." This essay has been much influenced both by Fried, and by his philosophical compatriot Stanley Cavell, particularly the latter's explorations of what happens when we misinterpret "a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack" (See *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 263).

indirect mastery). But the experiences these poems impose differ, and are in fact diametrically opposed. We cannot accept both of their claims to determine the meaning of war, and so must choose between the claims on extrinsic grounds—we might find compelling Owen’s claim to immediate experience in the Great War, or might conversely find compelling Yeats’s claim to panoptic experience of the cycles of history. Whichever author we disbelieved we would be compelled to dismiss as inauthentic. If, on the other hand, we reject such a choice between two rival poets, insisting on remaining in a position to appreciate both of their poems, then we cannot credit either poem with fulfilling its author’s polemical purpose. Or, at least, we can say only that it fulfilled that purpose accidentally, in the manner of a stopped clock being right twice a day.

The underlying problem with Owen’s and Yeats’s approach is almost trivially simple: purely imaginative poetry cannot be given real content without opening the door for disagreements that cannot be adjudicated on purely imaginative grounds. Coleridge, for what it’s worth, saw this dilemma clearly. When he finally agreed to publish “Kubla Khan,” he put it forward “rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the grounds of any supposed poetic merits.”<sup>30</sup> The curiosity lay in how the author’s memory of his vision allegedly vanished once he was “unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock.” That is: the poem falls silent because, confronted with the plurality of persons, the sovereign decrees of the imagination were revealed to be incapable of forging the community of which they dreamt. Coleridge abandoned “Kubla Khan” when it became apparent that its poetics could not be a poetics of communal peace. Either the imagination would remain solitary, or it would lead to

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<sup>30</sup> Coleridge, *The Major Works*, 102.

violence. Owen and Yeats, on the other hand, filled with indignation towards the utterances of other speakers, embraced the idea of making war upon them. To attempt to banish one's rivals on the basis, not of refuted evidence, but of differing mood, amounts, to put it bluntly, to solipsism, and a failure to live up to the dream of peace implicit in these poems' visions of artistic community—the hope of “distant rest” towards which Owen's poem marches, or of the “little halfway house” towards which Yeats's poem climbs. These poems' repose cannot but be solitary.

Perhaps, however, blunt instruments are not the proper tools with which to pursue a critique such as this one. After all, these poems are not ignorant about their failures. To the contrary, they broadcast them, taking a perverse delight in the apparent impossibility of any poem achieving the peaceful ends for which these poems of war profess to aim. In the end, I have not said anything about these poems that they do not say about themselves, I have only shown that they also, and more devastatingly, say them about each other.

## 2. The Hypocrisy of Martyrdom in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

The poet who subscribes to the Owen-Yeats poetics depends on there being a substantive difference between himself and the anti-poet whom he attacks, but that difference turned out to be an illusion erected in order to justify the attack. The anti-poet is simply a poet seen from the outside, by someone else who harbors poetic ambitions. The natural line of defense for the would-be imaginative warrior cognizant of this situation will be to identify a line of demarcation between the forces of poetry and the forces of anti-poetry, one which can be defended without running the risk of indefensible arbitrariness.

I should clarify that, by non-arbitrary, I mean a non-arbitrariness immanent to the poem. If a poet fights for a religious or political belief, that belief may well be non-arbitrary in itself, but it remains an open question whether it is anything but arbitrary as far as the resulting poem is concerned. A soldier, likewise, might fight for a good or a bad cause, but his rifle knows nothing of that cause, and does not greatly differ from the rifles held by soldiers on the other side of no-man's-land. The arbitrariness of this relationship need not make any great difference; the justice of a soldier's cause is not affected by the fact that his and his enemy's rifles are interchangeable. It will make a difference, however, if a soldier infers from the injustice of his enemy's cause that his enemy's rifles must themselves be unjust, and then makes this alleged injustice itself into a *casus belli*; one could reasonably ask such a soldier why he does not turn his weapons against themselves. A similar question arises when a poem uses the non-poetic valence of the enemy's poem to impugn that poem's poetic merit, and to define its own. Such attacks obscure (are intended to obscure) the difficulties inherent in any attempt to take poetic sides.

I take an acknowledgement of these difficulties to be the achievement of T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, to which we will now turn. Eliot's play is about the danger of hypocrisy lurking within any attempt to wage imaginative warfare. The war in question in this case is that between church and state; the play depicts the last days in the life of Saint Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, leading up to his murder, three days after Christmas, within the walls of Canterbury Cathedral itself. He was killed by Four Knights who believed themselves to be acting at the behest of King Henry II, who resented Becket for complex political reasons which the play does not attempt to explicate. The poem focuses instead on the

shape of Becket's martyrdom, which Eliot summarized in these words: "A man comes home, foreseeing that he will be killed, and he is killed."<sup>31</sup> As we will see, this shape is not that of a fixed boundary line between religious and secular, but rather that of an act of digression, threatening to descend into hypocrisy, and a subsequent return to the authentic origin.

We see this shape in the very structure of the play, which is, as Denis Donoghue points out, peculiar, and impossible to justify on straightforward aesthetic grounds: "everything after Part One is structurally superfluous. Even the distinguished prose sermon and the speech of the assassins, intrinsically so interesting, are *tours de force* and, structurally, redundant."<sup>32</sup> The extraneous status of Part Two admits of two rival explanations, one religious and one secular. On the one hand we can understand the structure of the play as an echo of the Catholic mass: Becket's temptation in Part I parallels the Liturgy of the Word; Becket's murder in Part II parallels the Liturgy of the Eucharist; and the sermon Becket delivers in the interlude between them parallels the sermon.<sup>33</sup> These features do not, however, make the play into a quasi-religious ritual; as James Matthew Wilson points out, the formal coincidence only guarantees the analogy to ritual, not that analogy's interpretation.<sup>34</sup> The play's form thus returns us again and again to the question: what is the relationship between what this drama does on the stage, and what any priest does on the altar? On the other hand, setting aside the liturgical elements, we can see this play's structure as an exercise in dramatic diversion. In Eliot's one-line summary of the play quoted above, Part I depicts the foresight, Becket's return to Canterbury

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<sup>31</sup> Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Donoghue, *The Third Voice*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed accounting of the parallels, see Ayers, "Murder in the Cathedral."

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, "The Formal and Moral Challenges of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*," 178–83.

and defense against the wiles of the Four Tempters, while Part II shows the martyrdom, where vision becomes action, or at least an active suffering. The foresight, notice, finds itself confined to a subordinate clause, a secular digression deferring, but not denying, the central religious proposition.

If Part I consists in an act of digression, at its heart is the appearance of the Fourth Tempter, the one Becket does not anticipate: “I expected | Three visitors, not four.”<sup>35</sup> The Fourth Tempter quotes Becket’s own words back to him, but with their meaning twisted (compare Becket’s speech on 182 with the Fourth Tempter’s speech on 193). He even paraphrases the Gospels to his own purposes: “Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest | On earth, to be high in heaven” (192). The paradox with which the Fourth Tempter’s digression confronts Becket is this: the foreseen fruits of martyrdom are desirable above all else, but for a martyrdom to be a true martyrdom it must not be sought. The interval between Part I and Part II, between the death foreseen and the death suffered, cannot be bridged through a fulfilled intention. But an intentional link would nevertheless be the most natural inference, as Becket admits:

What yet remains to show you of my history  
Will seem to most of you at best futility,  
Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic,  
Arrogant passion of a fanatic.  
(197)

Becket’s difficulty is a Christianized variant of the complaint of Eliot’s earlier hero Prufrock: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (6). For Becket, as for Prufrock, the impossibility

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<sup>35</sup> Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950*, 190. Citations henceforth inline by page number.

has to do with the incoherence of the avowal. One cannot display outside what is hidden inside without at once destroying its hiddenness. This hiddenness is as essential to humility as it is to narcissism. The lunatic and the fanatic do not do what they do for good reasons, but we have no doubt that they intend to do them. For a would-be martyr, according to the play's logic, such certainty makes the entire enterprise futile.<sup>36</sup>

The Becket of Part I cannot display the martyrdom he sees before him, but in Part II the martyrdom becomes itself present to the audience. How can Becket's martyrdom become public in this way without becoming, instead of martyrdom, passionate self-slaughter? This may seem like an odd question to ask, but Becket takes it and the Fourth Tempter seriously (in a way he does not take seriously the other three). In the gap between Parts I and II we hear him deliver a Christmas sermon devoted to answering the charge of lunatic or fanatic suicide. His answer runs as follows:

A Christian martyrdom is no accident. Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. Ambition fortifies the will of men to rule over other men: it operates with deception, cajolery, and violence, it is the action of impurity upon impurity. Not so in Heaven. A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. (199)

The unstated but unavoidable conclusion of the sermon concerns Becket's own fast-approaching martyrdom: though foreseen most of all by himself, it is God's design, not his own. God, not Becket, says what Becket means, makes him into a tool of spiritual edification.

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<sup>36</sup> I call this the play's logic because, while Eliot seems to subscribe to it, I do not think it is actually true that intending to be seen as a martyr need be self-defeating in the same way as intending to be a martyr. These two are, at least, not logically impossible: (a) one does not intend to be martyred and (b) one intends that, if one is martyred, one's martyrdom will be interpreted correctly. I thank Charles Capps for helping me to clarify this point.

Theologically speaking, Becket's logic here is sound enough—but a problem remains, in the fact that the play contains a second event clearly identified as a tool of spiritual edification, namely, the sermon itself. Ought we to approach this sermon in a religious vein, or a dramatic one? Since this is, after all, a play, dramatic might seem the more probable option. But if we approach Becket's words as any other dramatic utterance, that is, by considering what it tells us about the speaker's intentions, then things start looking bad for Becket. As William B. Worthen puts it, "by presenting the text of Thomas's sermon through the rhetoric of realistic performance, Eliot invites us to interpret Thomas in the way we interpret characters in realistic drama, and perhaps in the way we interpret others in the prosaic drama of our own lives: by indirection, through the suspicion that motives are always falsified by their enactment."<sup>37</sup> The Fourth Tempter comes closest to suggesting this falsification when he points out what will happen if Becket declines to be martyred: a time will come

when men will not hate you  
Enough to defame or to execrate you,  
But pondering the quality that you lacked  
will only try to find the historical fact.  
When men shall declare that there was no mystery  
About this man who played a certain part in history.  
(192)

According to the Tempter, Becket longs to establish once and for all the mystery in his own history, removing it from the futile realm of comprehensible cause and effect. This desire is, according to the play's logic, precisely the temptation which he must most fervently resist: to seek to determine his own mystery would be to destroy it. Becket certainly claims to have overcome this temptation along with the three others, as in the lines quoted above, where he

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<sup>37</sup> Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, 128.



admits that most of his audience will find his martyrdom incomprehensible. But might he protest too much? Is not such a determination just what Becket's sermon attempts when it declares martyrdom to be the design of God? We might find it significant that Becket's sermon about the proper interpretation of martyrdom takes place almost immediately after Becket's exchange with the Fourth Tempter about his desire to control that interpretation. We could infer that Becket has, despite his denials, succumbed to the temptation, and that the argument he now makes is either haphazard or hypocritical, either valid only by accident or an invalid expression of self-will. The sermon tells us more about Becket himself than about the theology of martyrdom—or, perhaps we should say, it does not explain that theology so much as illustrate its snares.

If, however, we take a religious interest in the sermon, we will find it entirely coherent, only extreme in its implications. For as soon as martyrdom was expanded from the fact of the violent death, to its spiritually edifying interpretation—an expansion implicit in the commonplace etymological gloss of “martyr” as meaning “witness”—Becket's sermon itself became an act of martyrdom, and hence, according to the sermon itself, it could not have been intended by man, only designed by God. In a sense, when he sets out in the sermon to communicate to us this theory of divine design, Becket does not communicate at all—God does. We can align this situation with the structure of the play as a whole, as given in Eliot's one-line summary. The play consists of Becket returning home, foreseeing he will be killed, and then being killed, without his intending to be killed. Similarly, the sermon consists of Becket speaking, and foreseeing that we will interpret his words in a certain edifying way, and us indeed interpreting them in that way, but without him causing us to do so. God makes

Becket a martyr, and God brings us to understand that he has become one. This view of the limits of human communication, if extreme, has deep roots in the Christian tradition; according to Augustine of Hippo's *De Magistro*, for instance, all communication is divine communication.<sup>38</sup>

To summarize: under dramatic inspection Becket's sermon becomes less a reasoned discourse than a dramatic illustration, revealing to the audience Becket's flawed character. Becket intends to be seen as a martyr, and fulfills this intention by reminding his congregation that to have such an intention would invalidate the martyrdom. This view requires the fictional frame of the stage, for it places us simultaneously within Becket's mind, able to hear his private temptation, and outside of his world, able to stand in judgment over him. Given religious attention, on the other hand, the sermon becomes less a reasoned discourse than a religious ritual, intended only to create the conditions of possibility for divine intervention. Becket foresees what his martyrdom will mean to us, and then it means that to us, but without his having brought about its meaning, just as Becket foresees his martyrdom and then is martyred without having brought it about. This view requires that we hear the sermon in the same spirit as did the members of the original congregation. Which is to say that, though the Interlude does not resolve Becket's hypocrisy one way or the other, it does collapse the question "Was Becket a real martyr, or only a hypocrite?" into the question "Did we hear a real sermon, or only an actor pretending to give one?"

Becket's sermon collapses these two questions, but it alone does not give us the resources to answer either. If we can rule out neither Becket-as-ritual-victim nor Becket-as-

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<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher* XI.38.

realistic-hypocrite, then this very inability will constitute the interest of the play. Even the play's closing lines, in which the Chorus celebrates Thomas's sainthood, will only identify the former reading as "with" the play's grain and the latter as "against" it. They will do nothing to render the former inevitable or the latter untenable. Rather, the play will confront the viewer with a free moral choice, to see Becket (to see the world) either through secular eyes or through the eyes of a saint.

I would suggest that the play does more than this to determine our reading of it. To see how, we must turn from Becket's sermon to the play's concluding speeches. I have already mentioned the double structure of the play, such that Part II recapitulates Part I, with a difference. We should note specifically how Becket's sermon, though officially an interlude between the parts, finds its double in the knights' speeches at the close of Part II. Just as, following his temptation, Becket mounts the pulpit seemingly to justify himself, so, after his death, the murderous Four Knights step forward, seemingly to justify themselves. To read these speeches against the sermon follows directly from their structural affinities: these two are the only prose sections of the play; they serve as capstones to Part I and Part II respectively; and they state explicitly the claims underlying the actions of both Becket and his murderers. We will be forced to choose arbitrarily between two readings of the play only if we find ourselves unable to determine the relationship between these two scenes.

I begin by considering a popular method of determination which does not, in my estimation, actually work. The arguments of the Knights are, it is true, rendered in a language which parodies twentieth century political cant. Compared to Becket's elegant faux-medieval sermon, the Knights' too-smooth speeches seem crude and ugly. The stylistic difference

certainly tells us where Eliot's sympathies lay—but it does not tell us why ours should lie in the same direction. That the Knights are transparently manipulative does not prove that they are wrong to think Becket equally devious, and to think that it did would be a kind of aestheticism, a pre-Raphaelite belief that the Middle Ages were better because things were more honest back then.

If we turn from the style of the Knights' speeches to their content, it seems at first glance that they do more to demonstrate the indeterminacy we have been considering than they do to resolve it. After all, the speeches of the Second, Third, and Fourth Knights merely recapitulate at greater length Becket's earlier suggestion that futility, lunacy, and fanaticism were all of a piece, and that it did not much matter which of them he fell into. The Knights argue, respectively, that their act was disinterested, while Becket's was selfish; that their act was foundational for the modern secular state, which Becket had betrayed; and that martyrdom is anyhow madness, a kind of suicide. These arguments do not fit neatly together, but that fact is somewhat beside the point. In trying to decide between them, we have already accepted that some such explanation can account for Becket's behavior, and it is just this premise which Becket's martyrdom cannot survive. We are left with the conclusion that each party to the case has anticipated the argument of the other, and that, taken in isolation, both interpretations are plausible.

Indeed, reading this pair of scenes in this way means approaching them as if they were rival arguments in a trial for which the audience has been empaneled as jury. A peculiar trial, to be sure: because the Knights do not deny that they killed Becket, the trial turns less on their act of murder than on the Archbishop's act of martyrdom, alleged by the Knights to be an act

of false witness, while the Knights are true witnesses to Becket's falsity. But a trial nonetheless. Of course, our aesthetic judgment need not be so binary as a legal judgment must be. We can take the Archbishop's sermon, just as we do the Knight's speeches, to be a dramatic fiction presented for its symptomatic value. Becket and the Knights, we conclude, are equally well-spoken and equally self-serving. Perhaps, on balance, we find Becket the more appealing, but we nevertheless must recognize his fatal flaw, the spiritual pride that leads you to believe you can determine the meaning of your life, that you can make yourself into a martyr.

This would be a reasonable reading of the play—if it were in fact possible for us to maintain the spectatorial detachment it would require. But is it? It seems significant that Eliot arranged the very staging of the play so as to call our ability to do so into question. In a typical theater, we sit level with or even above the actors, and naturally feel ourselves to stand in judgment over the characters of the play. But Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* for a space in which, as he put it, "the audience were to be all on the same level, rather farther below the level of the stage than most of the seats in a theatre. [...] I had not thought of it as ever being seen from a gallery—from this point of view certain moments in the play inevitably turn out to be less effective."<sup>39</sup> So long as the audience feels the words of Becket and the Knights bearing down on them from above, detached aesthetic judgment becomes, if not impossible, at least impossible to take for granted. Such judgment thus becomes, in a way, the play's subject matter, and I would suggest that the purpose of the Knights' speeches is to prove a disinterested engagement with the play to be unsustainable.

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<sup>39</sup> Eliot, *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* V:526.

Aesthetic judgment runs into insoluble difficulties when it encounters the character of the First Knight, whose speeches bracket the longer arguments of the other three. It is also here that the true nature of the contrast between sermon and speech becomes apparent. Reading this scene with the idea of a trial-by-audience in mind, we notice almost immediately that the very idea comes from the First Knight's unpleasantly oleaginous first speech: "I appeal to your sense of honor. You are Englishmen, and therefore will not judge anybody without hearing both sides of the case" (215). "You," the audience, are hereby tasked with deciding between Becket and the Knights, as if to be a spectator carries with it the right to sit in judgment on the drama that has just unfolded. The apparent neutrality of this interpretive model turns out, then, to serve the purposes of the Four Knights. More importantly, this apparently neutral framework is in the end retracted for a quite different one, as revealed in the First Knight's closing speech: "I suggest that you now disperse quietly to your homes. Please be careful not to loiter in groups at street corners, and do nothing that might provoke any public outbreak" (219). These sentences, spoken as they are by armed agents of the Crown, constitute a veiled threat, a fact we recognize more clearly when we see their resemblance to the words of Clytaemnestra at the end of Eliot's favorite Greek tragedy, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*: "Let us not be bloody now. | Honored gentlemen of Argos, go to your homes now and give way."<sup>40</sup> In both plays the speaker's final reliance on coercion undercuts an earlier claim to submit to public justice.

*Murder in the Cathedral*, however, introduces an additional wrinkle, in that the First Knight's speech is addressed not to the Chorus but to the audience itself. This fact, like that of

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<sup>40</sup> Aeschylus, *Aeschylus II* ll. 1656–1657. Elsie Leach explores many connections between the two plays but, surprisingly, does not mention this one; see Leach, "Agamemnon as a Source of *Murder in the Cathedral*."

Becket's sermon to the audience, admits of multiple interpretations. On the one hand, we might notice that, where the Chorus is vulnerable to the weapons of Clytaemnestra's minions, we are as separate from the Knights as fact is from fiction, and infer an invitation to hear the Knight's implausible attempt at intimidation as a parable about the difference between theater and ordinary life. The First Knight's threat becomes an unwitting self-portrait once the frame of the stage is placed around it. So far, so good—but we should notice, also, that this frame encompasses as well the First Knight's original appeal to our authority as judges. If the Knights' speeches are a tempting fiction, then so is our authorization to stand in judgment over Becket and Knights in the first place. On the other hand—and more surprisingly—the Knight's threat can, again like Becket's sermon, be heard in a ritual vein. His warning, after all, is neither needless nor hollow. Not needless: the modernist theater had posed a threat to public order ever since the notorious 1907 premier of J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, where an angry audience forced the police to get involved.<sup>41</sup> Not hollow: the Second Knight had already claimed responsibility for the birth of the modern secular state, and that state could, in fact, be relied upon to punish anything “that might provoke any public outbreak.” So even if we are in no danger from the swords of the Knights, their words quite effectively call to mind the very real constraints which the state places on our reaction to the play we have just seen. They thus function as a kind of secular political ritual, and one which demands our submission.

It might seem that I take too seriously the possibility of taking the Knight's threat seriously. To be sure, Eliot would have thought the political ritual it purports to effect idolatrous, a following “after strange gods.” Nevertheless, I do not think that we can rule it out

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<sup>41</sup> Saddlemyer, “Introduction” xvii.

on intrinsic grounds, and, further, I think that Eliot recognizes this impossibility, and presents the choice between sermon and stump speech as a choice for or against *Murder in the Cathedral* itself. It matters at this point that the preaching comes between Parts I and II, while the threatening comes at the play's end. The sermon, if taken to be divinely efficacious, creates a bridge between foresight and action, and so allows us to speak of the play as a whole achieving a ritual unity. This does not mean deluding ourselves into thinking that it is really Saint Thomas speaking (as if the play needed to effect some kind of transubstantiation), but rather hearing the sermon in the right spirit: we must understand its recitation to be the capstone of a religiously edifying ritual meant to make room for the operation of "the design of God." The threat, on the other hand, attempts to deny the play any power to affect its audience, even while it emphasizes its disunity, the suicidal lack of fit between Part I and Part II, between the idea of Thomas and the reality of his demise. If we endorse the secular ritual of the Knight's threat, we endorse, not an alternate reading of the play, but the suppression of the play entirely at the hands of the modern political order. We cannot, then, understand the action of *Murder* as the Knights understand it, for they refuse to understand it at all. The First Knight's threat reveals this refusal and so undoes the illusion that they offer us a viable alternative to Becket's sermon.

With this illusion dissolved, so too dissolves our ability to conclude our engagement with the play through an act of aesthetic judgment. While Eliot has allowed us to hover in judgment over Knight and Archbishop alike, this hovering remains, not a point of rest, but a dubious balancing act, permitted only because our very pursuit of it reminds us that we must in the end come down on one side or the other. For this reason, *Murder in the Cathedral* does not



end with the Knights' Aeschylean threat, which is to say, with the close of Becket's trial for hypocritical false martyrdom. Rather, Eliot appends another scene, Aeschylean in its own way, being a gloss on the end of *The Eumenides*. Though the Athenian citizens in that play at first find the jury of their aesthetic judgment hung, the goddess of wisdom ultimately breaks the tie in favor of Orestes' innocence, and all exit in torchlit procession.<sup>42</sup> *Murder in the Cathedral* similarly ends, after the Knights exit, with a choral prayer: "Forgive us, O Lord," the women of Canterbury chant, "we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man." They then show us by example what our attitude toward Becket's guilt or innocence should be: "Blessed Thomas, pray for us" (221). Eliot hopes we will join the women's prayer, though he knows he has no recourse if, having already taken the Knights' directions to disperse, we are unable to do so.

I should offer here a brief word about Eliot's Chorus, generally regarded as one of this play's strongest elements. I do not deny that it is so, but I also believe Eliot to have been right in finding the chorus not to be truly dramatic, but rather a means by which "the dramatic weaknesses would be somewhat covered up by the cries of the women."<sup>43</sup> Eliot made this remark in a 1951 essay on "Poetry and Drama," by way of explaining why it was "that in *Murder in the Cathedral* I had not solved any general problem [of poetic verse]; but that from my point of view the play was a dead end."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, the crucial moments in this play's dramatic logic are not in poetry but in prose. Yet, as Eliot points out a few pages later, neither do the play's prose sections provide a model for future work. The "platform

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<sup>42</sup> Aeschylus, *Aeschylus II* 1. 1047.

<sup>43</sup> Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, 86.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

prose” of the Knights, Eliot writes, is “a kind of trick, that is, a device tolerable only in one play and of no use for any other.”<sup>45</sup> Both the poetry and the prose of the play are single-use.

We can connect this failure to fructify poetically with the play’s attitude toward literature as an autonomous cultural enterprise, which is decidedly negative. As Eliot’s critical prose would have it, “the religious play is not a substitute for liturgical observance and ceremonial, but something different. It is a combination of religious with ordinary dramatic interest”<sup>46</sup>; and dramatic interest, here, means “distraction [...] the holding of people’s attention without any effort on their part,” which the religious play manipulates in order to draw forth the “essentially religious craving [...] latent in all serious lovers of the drama.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Eliot’s creative energies here are not devoted to poetry. Rather, he aligns poetry with religious ritual, and focuses on the fate of prose given this alignment. Prose tends, as *Murder in the Cathedral* would have it, toward hypocritical theatricality, and the play does not offer an escape from that condition so much as an opportunity for it to be forgiven—an opportunity, however, which requires assimilation into that state from which the prosaic was always only a digression. The concluding ritual procession pulls the ladder of poetry up behind it, leaving prose, and audience, in the lurch. Such a joke can only be played once before the audience wises up.

### 3. Jones and Auden Contend with their Contemporaries

W. H. Auden pronounced a verdict rather like the above in his 1967 T. S. Eliot

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 86. This prohibition on authorial recycling contrasts sharply with the later Eliot’s general attitude towards repetition, for a nuanced discussion of which see Sharpe, “‘Always Present’.”

<sup>46</sup> Eliot, *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* V:521.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* V:523.

Memorial Lectures, published the next year as *Secondary Worlds*:

The dramatist who decides to write a play about someone whose life ends in martyrdom is quite powerless to solve this problem [that the martyr must not intend his death to be interesting]. He has no option but to choose someone either like Becket or Cranmer, who played an exceptional and interesting role in history, or like Celia in *The Cocktail Party*, for whom he can invent an interesting history. He can only hope against hope that his audience will have the moral sophistication to sense what, as a dramatist, a creator of secondary worlds, he is unable to say.<sup>48</sup>

The coincidence between Auden's and Eliot's distinction of religious meaning from dramatic interest is remarkable, but even more instructive is Auden's sense of the desperation of Eliot's dramaturgical gambit. Auden sees from outside the quality Eliot had described from within as that of being a "dead end," "of no use for any" future work, and he identifies its source in the dialectic of martyrdom and hypocrisy. It is as if the play martyrs, along with its protagonist, its own dramatic poetics, in favor of a higher ritual. No wonder, then, that it is difficult to imagine another play written in the same vein.

My point here is not that the particular play *Murder in the Cathedral* could provide no guidance to Auden, or to David Jones for that matter, in their attempts to represent the meaningfulness of human action. Rather, it is that the anti-poetics of martyrdom both on display in *Murder in the Cathedral* and implicit in much of Eliot's Christian poetry differs markedly from the poetics of ordeal of Jones and Auden, which we saw in chapter three. In the modernist context, martyrdom raises the question of hypocrisy to its greatest pitch because it purports to offer definitive evidence of sincerity. But the clarity allegedly on offer is not Christian and irenic, but pagan and poetomachic, of the kind tragically achieved when, as Yeats would have it, "all the drop scenes drop at once | Upon a hundred thousand stages." Eliot's

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<sup>48</sup> Auden, *Prose* V:265.

solution is to disavow the inherently hypocritical quest for sincerity, and to disavow this disavowal as itself hypocritical, and so on, *ad infinitum*. This negative poetics differs markedly from the positive poetics to which Jones and Auden were drawn. Rather than seeking to escape from hypocrisy in the abrupt transparency of death, these poets sought to escape from worrying about hypocrisy by recognizing that, over the long run of life, truth tends to come out.

Consider the contrast between *Murder in the Cathedral* and the works discussed in chapter three, Jones's illustrations for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Auden's *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. All three are concerned with the differences between hypocrisy and piety, between theater and ritual, and between curse and blessing, and all three develop extensive formal symmetries to explore these metaphysical asymmetries. But Eliot's drama displays Becket's simultaneous transition from each first term to each last term, a transition which coincides with death, only after which is the chorus able to speak of "Blessed Thomas," a figure radically unlike ourselves. Blessing becomes what happens when the threat of interpretation, conceived as necessarily distorting, is vanquished by divine intervention. Can my deeds be true reflections of my thoughts? Yes, if God makes me a martyr, and my deeds (my poems) become not mine but His (rituals). Jones's Mariner and Auden's Joseph and Simeon, in contrast, do not escape interpretation but rather submit to recognition. Each emphasizes that recognition is not inevitable, and shows that this lack of inevitability does not prevent us from accepting it when we recognize its advent. Can our thoughts, and so our deeds, live up to their external objects? Yes, sometimes, if we recognize that our (poetic) engagement with the things around us has already been blessed.

The divergence between Eliot's poetics and those of Jones and Auden is not terribly surprising. More surprising, in retrospect, was the expectation that they should converge. We associate Eliot with Jones and Auden on the grounds that he, too, can be best characterized, after the merely contextualizing epithets of "English," "modernist," and "poet," as a "convert to Christianity."<sup>49</sup> Strictly speaking, however, this appellation applies only to Eliot, who turned away from Unitarianism towards an Anglo-Catholicism which he understood in terms of asceticism and aesthetics: Christianity would empty the convert's self and refashion it into an integrated soul, just as it would do for the broader culture, if that culture would allow itself to be ruled by religion.<sup>50</sup> Auden is more accurately categorized as a revert; as he modestly put it, at the age of thirty-three "I started going to church again," returning from two decades of agnosticism to the Anglican Christianity of his childhood.<sup>51</sup> As Arthur Kirsch has argued convincingly, in Auden's time away from the Church he had continued to think in basically Christian terms, only translated into what he then thought were the secular, scientific successors to Christian wisdom.<sup>52</sup> Jones, finally, practiced Christianity his entire life, merely abandoning his low-church upbringing in favor of the Church of Rome at age twenty-eight, and he saw Catholicism as the fulfillment of an impulse to liturgy that had been present in him since

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<sup>49</sup> See for example Medcalf, "Eliot, David Jones, and Auden." "English," of course, is itself ambiguous: Eliot was an American seeking to become English, while Jones and Auden were Englishmen who often seemed to wish they were otherwise.

<sup>50</sup> Ever since it took place the nature of Eliot's conversion has been a matter of great contention. It has been called everything from an embrace of European culture, to an act of intellectual abdication, to a piece of performance art. I have found particularly helpful for thinking about it Brooker, *Mastery and Escape* and Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity*.

<sup>51</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 471.

<sup>52</sup> See Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*.

childhood.<sup>53</sup> While these all differ from one another, I find Auden's and Jones's trajectories substantially closer to one another than they are to Eliot's: while Eliot saw his conversion as a passage through death into new life, Jones and Auden saw their confessions of faith as recognitions of what they had been all along without knowing it. If this were merely a matter of biographical detail, to point it out would be pedantic, but it seems to me emblematic of the central difference between Eliot's aesthetic attitudes, and those of Jones and Auden. Eliot prefers an eternally compacted anti-poetics of martyrdom, Jones and Auden a temporally extended poetics of ordeal, one worried less about escaping (or accepting) hypocrisy than about avoiding the kind of isolated mastery susceptible to hypocrisy in the first place.

Yet Auden and Jones share Eliot's worries about the relationship between art and violence, and if the poetics at which they arrive differs from that of their martyrdom-obsessed Faber editor, it has even less in common with the unabashed imaginative warfare of Owen and Yeats. The difference here is readily apparent in the contrast between, on the one hand, Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" and Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli," discussed above, and on the other, the last pair of works from Chapter Two, Jones's *In Parenthesis* frontispiece and Auden's "In Praise of Limestone." These works' thematic connections only foreground the radical differences between them. Jones and Owen may both be concerned with the atmospherics of trench warfare, but Jones's suffering soldier does not plunge uncontrollably at us seeking to impress us into his ranks; rather, he displays for us both his vulnerability and his potential for violence, and suggests that we cannot avoid recognizing his and our human flesh to have both of these qualities. Auden's statues may be of blessed marble metamorphosed from inconstant limestone,

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<sup>53</sup> Blissett, *The Long Conversation*, 126.

not unlike Yeats' symbol of longevity carved in discolored cracking lapis lazuli, but he celebrates the mutability not for the opportunity it offers us heroically to rebuild whatever inevitably falls, but because it allows for a fluid play of guilt and forgiveness, concealment and revelation.

These differences are, of course, even less surprising than those between our central poets and Eliot: these three at least shared a common faith, while Owen and Yeats were both devotees (if occasionally remorseful ones) of the religion of art. We will learn less at this point from elaborating on the differences than from looking at how Jones and Auden responded to them. I will focus on two sets of responses in particular. Owen was of great importance to the younger Auden,<sup>54</sup> but already by the mid-thirties he had largely dropped out of the picture, and the later Auden rarely mentions him.<sup>55</sup> I will therefore focus instead on Jones's response to his fellow soldier-poet, a response which finds full articulation only near the end of Jones's life. Yeats, conversely, was of little importance to Jones, who said only that his own work was incomprehensible to those who think "imaginatively"—in the Yeats tradition."<sup>56</sup> Unlike the imaginative poets, Jones claimed, he did not seek a creation *ex nihilo*, but rather to move "from the known to the unknown," which movement he equates with "the business of 'form' and 'content'." Meanwhile Auden, greatly influenced by Yeats beginning in the mid-thirties,<sup>57</sup> began

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 410, who quotes Auden declaring in 1939 that one of his "favorite texts" while a student at Oxford had been Owen's "Insensibility."

<sup>55</sup> Galvin, "The Guilt of the Noncombatant and W.H. Auden's 'Journal of an Airman'" argues that 1932's *The Orators* rejects Owen as a viable poetic model.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, 189.

<sup>57</sup> Mendelson dates Auden's interest in Yeats to 1933, cf. Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 169.

arguing against Yeats's ghost soon after the elder poet died in January 1939, and did not cease until near the end of his life.<sup>58</sup> I will begin with this last and longest-lasting argument.

Auden was able to work out his distrust of the elder poet at such leisure only because at no time was he willing to issue an unequivocal condemnation. We see this reluctance already in Auden's immediate response to Yeats's death, the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," which paid homage to that poet's mastery even while deeming him at times silly. It also infamously proclaimed that "poetry makes nothing happen"<sup>59</sup>—a striking phrase, and one apparently poised against Yeats's political ambitions, but also a phrase endlessly interpretable and endlessly debatable. The courtroom drama of "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats," written only a few months later, sought to clarify the connection between silly ambition and culpable corruption with a hyperbolically negative assessment, one presented not *in propria persona* but dramatically: Yeats lacked, according to the Prosecution, "firstly a gift of a very high order for memorable language, secondly a profound understanding of the age in which he lives, and thirdly a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time."<sup>60</sup> But the defense does away with all three claims in short order, finding the first false and the latter two as irrelevant as "the belief of an earlier age that a great artist must be chaste."<sup>61</sup> Auden returns repeatedly to Yeats's implausible politics and metaphysics, but always in order to deny that such implausibility is itself grounds for complaint; at most, it provides a hint that something is amiss.

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<sup>58</sup> An early but insightful account of this quarrel can be found in Callan, *Auden*, in the chapter titled "Disenchantment with Yeats: from Singing-Master to Ogre."

<sup>59</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 248.

<sup>60</sup> Auden, *Prose* II:3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* II:5.



The deeper problem, Auden suggests in his next foray, a 1940 review of *Last Poems*, was Yeats's indifference to the very idea of truth. His politics and metaphysics were implausible not by chance, but because he "was always more concerned with whether or not a phrase sounded effective, than with the truth of its idea or the honesty of its emotion."<sup>62</sup> Even such indifference, however, only became a poetic liability when it prevented Yeats from incorporating into his poems contemporary views of science and history. Due to this absence, Auden cryptically suggests, Yeats "never succeeded in writing a long poem" and wrote with a "lack of drama which not all his theater can conceal."<sup>63</sup> Length and drama are here aligned: a long poem, which is to say a complex poem, is one that puts different conceptual structures into dramatic opposition, and sees what results. Yeats erred by assuming that the aesthetic value of an idea was self-evident in a way that made such experimentation unnecessary. Some of Yeats's poems, like "Man and the Echo" or "The Circus Animals Desertion," may suggest a kind of poetic scrupulousness, but not of a kind that ever doubts the basic commitment to prioritizing lyric interiority over dramatic interaction.

Drama remained an important concept as Auden's critique of Yeats progressed, and the need for poetic risk-taking and self-criticism became more explicit. Complaints about Yeats's silly preference for beauty over truth, meanwhile, dropped out in favor of claims that his words were hollow. In a 1944 review of a Yeats biography, Auden writes: "Yeats's temptation—he never succumbed to it completely—to regard art as a religious ritual damages the art for it prevents the artist from taking serious risks of failure. Magnificent as is their diction, I cannot

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. II:62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. II:63.

but feel that his poems lack a certain inner resonance.”<sup>64</sup> The final word here recalls Auden’s earlier suggestion that Yeats could not write a long and truly dramatic poem. Yeats’s poems ring hollow, and can only succeed when they are kept sufficiently short and simple to avoid one part being sounded against another. Moreover, Auden now has a theory as to the cause of this hollowness. By the time he writes this review he is a practicing Christian, and does not mean the phrase “religious ritual” to be merely pejorative. The point, rather, is that the poet must not mistake himself for a priest, and that the risky drama of self-interrogation does not much resemble the orderly rituals of divine worship. “Poetry makes nothing happen” finds itself transformed here into a claim, not that Yeats’s poems were too political, but that they were not political enough, seeking to evade argument by resorting to what Auden considered the pre-political authority of religion.

Auden came finally to understand Yeats’s hollowness as one of rhetoric. In 1948 he wrote “Yeats as an Example,” an account of those elements of the dead master’s poetry that could, in Auden’s view, be productively imitated. The essay is curious, however, because the very elements it highlights as valuable innovations are those that, in other contexts, Auden condemns. Yeats succeeded, Auden suggests, where Gerard Manley Hopkins failed, at “develop[ing] a rhetoric to replace the Tennysonian rhetoric”—rhetoric here meaning a way of speaking about political events which will have “at once personal and public interest.”<sup>65</sup> Yeats accomplished this, however, only through the assumption—not an unreasonable one, given Yeats’s circle of acquaintances, but still, poetically speaking, a dangerous one—that what was

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. II:174.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. II:388.

of personal interest simply was thereby of public interest also, and vice versa. Such an assumption both excessively magnified the poet's historical importance, and refused to submit his interests to public correction. Yeats's rhetoric was magnificent, but he could not listen to how it resonated against dramatic opposition.

At least, so Auden would argue if this were a critique of Yeats. Instead, by writing instead an essay of appreciation, Auden begins to back away from any direct attack on the dead master, a retreat that intensifies in his libretto for "Elegy for Young Lovers" (1959–60), a grim parody of the Yeatsian bard, and culminates in Auden's declining, when the *Paris Review* interviewed him in 1972, to fault Yeats on any grounds at all. These words offer Auden's final assessment, if it can be called an assessment: "I find it very difficult to be fair to Yeats because he had a bad influence on me. He tempted me into a rhetoric which was, for me, oversimplified. Needless to say, the fault was mine, not his. He was, of course, a very great poet."<sup>66</sup> Although it is difficult not to hear in this a kind of irony, Auden does mean what he says. The point is not that Yeats was *not* a very great poet, nor that the fault was *not* Auden's, for succumbing to the temptation to imitate him. Rather, Auden wants us to reconsider how we evaluate these things, greatness and influence—and reconsider how Yeats would have evaluated them, namely, by conflating them, just as he conflated public and private, beauty and truth. Auden calling Yeats great while decrying his influence amounts to as strong a statement as he could make against Yeats's poetic practice, while refusing to condemn his poems.

Auden spent thirty-three years thinking out loud about the proper attitude to take toward his poetic predecessor. With Jones's critique of Owen, the pattern is quite different.

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<sup>66</sup> Auden, "The Art of Poetry No. 17."

Jones claimed in 1973 to “have been familiar with [Owen’s poems] only in recent years,”<sup>67</sup> but on this subject he may protest too much: eleven years earlier he had been comfortable drawing a line between his own work and a litany of poets including Owen.<sup>68</sup> As early as 1954 Jones was discussing the relation between Owen’s poems and *In Parenthesis*, or, rather, the lack thereof, as he claimed (as it happens, in a letter to Auden) that “I had not read Wilfred Owen’s poem at the time of writing *In. Paren.*,” phrasing which strongly suggests that he had read it subsequently.<sup>69</sup> The most charitable and plausible explanation of these seemingly contradictory comments, I think, is that Jones had a high bar for what counted as familiarity with an author’s work. This high bar was related to his suspicion of all attempts to trace “influences”—Jones almost never wrote at length about the work of other poets, especially not of his near-contemporaries, and especially not of the relation between their work and his own.

In any case, Jones offered a substantial consideration of Owen only in the last years of his life, principally in a long letter to René Hague which for several paragraphs takes issue with Owen’s theological poetics. After praising Owen’s “astonishing achievement” of writing his poems under the pressure of the trenches, Jones enters an objection:

I don’t like his identification of the grimly circumstances and maims and “dole and tray and tene” with the passion of the Incarnate Logos—yes the bit you quote from the letter is an astonishing *tour de force* and, as you say, “terrific.” But, none the less, I don’t like the analogy—the very consciously stated analogy. Its brilliant artistry and skill and plain stated factualness, down to the right way to tie the leather thong of Field Service Boots—do not, for me, at all events, justify what I think is the very unfortunate theology implied, well, more than implied, but quite explicit.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, 245.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

This critique can be surprising, coming from the author of *In Parenthesis*, which seems at least to extend the possibility of such an identification between soldier and Christ. Perhaps sensing this confusion, Jones goes on in the next paragraph to relate the objectionable aspect of the identification to Owen's Welsh Protestantism:

It may be, indeed it may well be, that Owen (*lux perpetua luceat ei*) was so sincerely a believer in that particular tradition of 'Christ crucified' that has been from the beginnings as far as Wales is concerned in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, its height in the middle or later part of the nineteenth century, *the* religion of Protestant Wales, for though Owen was born and nourished in the English Low Church tradition of the English shires bordering the Welsh lands and I don't think he ever spoke of his Welsh ancestry in his poetry, but he may well have inherited much of the same religion of Bryn Calfaria [Calvary Hill, name of a Welsh hymn tune], whereby, if he did, he might well however unconsciously, quite naturally as an infantry officer see in all the mutilation and death an image of the immolated *geong haeled thaet waes God Almihtig* of the A[nglo]-S[axon] *Dream of the Rood*. Perhaps it may even have made it possible for him to write these poems when actually in action. And it may very well have caused him to write, under such immediate pressure, of that "old lie" to rhyme with *pro patria mori*.<sup>71</sup>

Jones elaborates on Wales and the Protestantizing of Wales in other writings, but here his focus is on the aesthetic effect that (perhaps unconscious) religious inheritance had on Owen's poetry. He names three related features: its natural identification of the suffering soldier with the beautiful "young hero that was God Almighty"; its swift composition in the midst of war; and its facile disgust, a reaction to "immediate pressure," with political motives for soldierly action. The first and last both concern the soldier-Christ analogy; Owen's alleged theology emphasizes how both die innocent at the hands of the sinful world. The central aspect deals rather with the simplicity of this theology, which makes it well-suited, Jones suggests, for powerful immediate aesthetic perception.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 246.

This Protestant theological aesthetic briefly outlined, Jones now engages in some literary-historical speculation. I take this sentence to be the heart of his response to Owen, and his key terms are “hesitated and seen”:

Whereas had he not himself become one with those fallen, but had survived to consider “in tranquillity” he *might* have hesitated and seen that there was no “old lie,” but something more akin to Isaias’ *non est species ei neque decor, et vidimus eum et non erat aspectus*.<sup>72</sup>

Jones imagines here a mode of poetic creation that moves from known to unknown, not by dint of a special experience, but through the gradual increase of understanding that comes from second-guessing. If Owen had lived to adopt such a mode, his perception of the relations of soldier, nation, and God “*might*” have been transformed (and so, one supposes, Owen might have become at least an unconscious Catholic). The resulting vision, however, is difficult to pin down, and the best Jones can offer here is a scriptural tag. The Latin quotation is from Isaias 53:2, a description of the Suffering Servant, usually taken as a prophecy of Christ: “there is no beauty in him, nor comeliness: and we have seen him, and there was no sightliness.” Evidently Jones means to rewrite the Horatian maxim so as to evade any suspicion of falsehood. Though on the surface *non est species ei neque decor*, the soldier in fact suffers not only at the hands of, but also in the service of, the *patria*. The service, rather than the suffering, must be the basis for any analogy of soldier to Christ, and also the grounds for the disanalogy. The *patriae* they serve differ, one being earthly, the other heavenly.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 246.

Does this revision in fact differ substantially from Owen's attitude? Jones does not seem entirely confident in the answer to this question, turning quickly away from his imagining of Owen's interrupted career to consider the status of his own work:

However that may be, I have again meandered, for I merely wished to indicate that in writing *In Paren*. I had no intention whatsoever in presuming to compare the varied maims, death-strokes, miseries, acts of courage etc. of the two contending forces, ours or those "against whom we found ourselves by misadventure," with the Passion, self-Oblation and subsequent Immolation and death of the Cult-hero of our Xtian tradition. For that is a unique and profound Mystery of Faith.<sup>73</sup>

The defensive insistence of "no intention whatsoever" might lead us to suspect that Jones suspected his book, whatever his intentions, of indulging in the disallowed comparison—after all, one cannot read *In Parenthesis* carefully without at least wondering whether the soldier's sacrifice and Christ's resemble one another in certain respects. And the pile-up of capital letters and final, fragmentary sentence are perhaps excessively emphatic, suggesting a lack of real seriousness in the claim. The hyperbole here is not, however, entirely self-stultifying; rather, it marks the impossibility of boiling down Jones's position to any simple equation or inequation between Christ, soldier, and poet. By running the three together, Owen engaged in a kind of presumptuous mystification, invoking a supposedly intuitive religious attitude (though one which, in Jones's estimation, was unhelpfully simplistic) in order to determine the appropriate response to secular phenomena. For Jones, the poet is analogous to the soldier is analogous to Christ, but also to myriad other mythic figures, and in any case every analogy implies a difference.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 246.

So Jones contrasts hesitating vision and immediate pressure, just as Auden opposed the dramatic to the merely rhetorical. Both, in other words, accuse the excessively imaginative poet of privileging first thoughts over second thoughts. This distinction cannot be reduced to that drawn earlier between Owen and Yeats, the former a poet of immediate, the latter of panoptic, experience. Rather, experience itself contrasts with resistance to experience, the latter motivated by a belief that all experience is subject to interpretation and so in danger of misinterpretation. The poet can neither take his experience for granted nor escape experience altogether, but must brave the dangers posed by its interpretation. Only by doing so can he hope to recognize its true nature and represent that nature in a work of art, and only through such representation can he make his experiences recognizable to others as paradigmatically human.

In the description just given a martial metaphor remains, but it bears quite different application than the imaginative warfare of Owen and Yeats, or even the imaginative martyrdom of Eliot. The poet struggles only with the privacy of his own experience, finding a form with which to make it public. He does not seek to overcome others, exiling them violently from the field of poetry. Auden is careful to acknowledge Yeats's greatness as a poet even while critiquing his influence; Jones emphasizes Owen's brilliant artistry and tragically unrealized potential even while remarking his theological errors. Neither does he seek to overcome himself, abandoning the category of poetry altogether. Where the later Eliot seems almost to have written poetry so as to be able to stop writing it, Jones and Auden both produced far more in the second halves of their careers than in the first. Instead of turning abruptly against the violence of modernist poetry, these poets sought gradually to salvage its achievement.



At the beginning of this book, I suggested that the peculiarity tying together Jones's and Auden's careers was how they devoted their lives to poetry while considering it only an avocation. What we have seen in this and the previous chapter goes some way toward explaining this decision. There can be no poetic vocations or elections because poetry is not a religion; it does not mediate between human and divine, but between private and public. There can, however, be lives spent on poetry, because poetry involves the gradual growth of experience into form. Hesitating over or thinking twice about a poem is, as Jones and Auden see it, a very human thing to do.

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