

In Parenthesis: A War Liturgy

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Biography

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Abstract

David Jones wrote *In Parenthesis* as a kind of testimonial to his experiences of World War I. He shaped the memories into a liturgical pattern, as soldiers become sacrificial victims who undergo a process of initiation in seven stages, over a period of seven months, leading to their immolation. Dai Great-Coat is an archetype of the timeless soldier.

Résumé

David Jones écrit *In Parenthesis* comme une sorte de témoignage attestant de son expérience de la première guerre mondiale. Il en esquisse le souvenir sur un mode liturgique, les soldats, victimes sacrificielles, se soumettant à une initiation à sept degrés, sur une période de sept mois, jusqu'à leur immolation finale. Dai Great Coat fait figure de l'archétype du soldat intemporel.

Keywords

David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937), War Poetry, World War I, 1915, 1916, Liturgy, *Y Goddodin* (6th Century), Aneurin, Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Mametz Wood, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot,

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In Parenthesis was written some ten years after the end of the war, at a time when Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves were writing their memoirs. Now David Jones's work has nothing in common with memoirs, even if it draws on memories of his own experience as an infantryman on the Somme. In his preface to *In Parenthesis* he says: "This writing has to do with some things I saw, felt and was part of. The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916". David Jones is so keen on pointing out that *In Parenthesis* is based on facts, that a map of the sector with references to the pages of the poem is included in the hardback first edition. *In Parenthesis* is crammed with realistic, graphic renderings of incidents and settings, which makes it one of the best documented works on the day-to-day life of the "foot-mob".

David Jones's purpose is not to record memories, but to use them in designing and "making" a work of art, which does not give "a likeness", but an "equivalence" of the war. This new "construction" is an object in its own right, "a thing-in-itself", with its own "structural design", and "structural coherence". By nature, war is chaotic;

David Jones attempts to bring order into that confusion, and give it a meaningful “shape”. This purpose will be achieved by transmuting the war experience into a war liturgy.

The pattern of this liturgy is borrowed from sacrificial myths. David Jones draws on pagan and Christian rituals. Fertility rites and religions of vegetation — such as the sacrifices to Balder in his Grove, or to Diana Nemorensis, Diana of the Woods, — are combined with Old Testament sacrifices and the immolation of Christ, as it is enacted in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass. For David Jones, pagan and Christian myths harmonize, as they hold in common the offering and killing of a victim to satisfy some divinity.

In *In Parenthesis*, the victim — or victims — is a group of soldiers: privates such as John Ball or Dai Great-Coat, with their officers such as Mr. Jenkins. So, this liturgy deals with a corporate victim, that could be described as a fellowship of infantrymen. They stand for the many men of all regiments involved in the fighting. In a liturgy the characterization of each individual is not essential as they are figures rather than characters; but David Jones succeeds in making them both real and emblematic. Take John Ball for instance: on the one hand he is a true-to-life private, clumsy, ill at ease with the “disciplines of the war”, by no means a hero, but a good decent fellow who “does his bit” — on the other hand he is the emblem of the docile, innocent victim, who did not choose to be sacrificed, but accepts his victimization. John Ball, like his chums, is both a real Tommy and a liturgical figure.

Now, this liturgy does not concern the sacrifice only; actually, the killing does not take place until the very end of the poem. *In Parenthesis* is the liturgy of the soldier’s progress, more precisely the progress from soldier to victim. It is not enough to be an infantryman doomed to be a victim; he must become worthy of being a victim, so that he may be accepted and gratified by the divinity. This war liturgy is less concerned with the enacting of the sacrifice than with the shaping of the soldier into a proper victim. *In Parenthesis* is more than the story of a journey from England to Mametz Wood, it is more than a march up to a sacrificial wood, it is about the victim’s initiation.

Let us consider the progress of this initiation. Any liturgy is a kind of performance, of dramatization, and consists in “doing” and “saying”. In *In Parenthesis*, the “doing” is based on the journey of a troop of soldiers from England to their slaughter on a wooded hill at Mametz. This march and the liturgy are divided into seven stages and cover a seven-month period. *In Parenthesis* is therefore based on a seven-action scheme. (We must not forget that seven is a sacred number). This dramatization gives an abstract of any infantryman’s experience. David Jones has selected the characteristic events and trials any foot soldier went through in that war of attrition: crossing the Cannel, training in France, going up the line, a period in the trenches, rest behind the frontline, preparations for the attack, and the assault which ends in a slaughter. These seven stages make the seven parts of *In Parenthesis*, or the seven acts of a concise, comprehensive and representative dramatic action, which is a paradigm of the war. Likewise, the four and a half years of the war are shortened to seven months, thanks to a synthesis in time. These devices are necessary in a liturgy, as it gives a condensed and symbolic sequence of events.

I. The seven stages, or seven “doings”, of this war liturgy:

1/ Part I of *In Parenthesis* is a rite of admission. The march from the camp in England “initiates the liturgy of a regiment departing” and the sergeants’ orders are

“ritual words”. Crossing the Channel amounts to going through the gate to a sacrificial area. The war zone in France is considered by David Jones as a “Waste Land”, which is not only a wrecked area, but also a place of trial, as in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. That gate is also compared to the gate to Hell. On disembarking, the soldiers are beginning a descent into Hell, and as it is well known, on such a journey there are many hurdles to be cleared, and the will and strength of the hero are severely tested. Thus, the soldiers are entering the field of hazards and trials.

2/ In Part II, the admission is followed by a noviciate. These newcomers, destined to become victims, get acquainted with the ways and spirit of the fighting soldier. They are instructed in tactics and the handling of weapons, and their bodies are made stronger by parades and long marches. These novices, also called “catechumens”, are taught by “tall guardsmen, their initiators” and prepare for their baptism of fire.

This baptism of fire is the first crucial moment of this war liturgy; it takes place right in the middle of *In Parenthesis*, half-way along the sacrificial march. It is a sacramental act, turning the novices, or “catachumens”, into fully qualified victims. This baptism is performed in two stages: the first one, in part III, is an initiation; the second one, in Part IV, is the baptism, proper.

3/ The Initiation (in Part III) is an initiation to a chthonian mystery. The descent into Hell, which had been foretold when the troops landed in France, is now taking place. The soldiers march to the frontline, down narrow, winding trenches in the dark. Symbolically, they go “past the little gate” to the Chapel Perilous, walk through “the long, strait, dark entry” of the palace of Mars, which in Chaucer is based on the description of Hades, and through the eight gates Arthur had to pass in his “Harrowing of Hades”. They reach the frozen regions of the Celtic underworld where the “long-barrow sleepers” of Mac Og lie, and the baleful “dogs of Annyn” bark. As in many initiation rites these troops wander in the dark; but an ominous moon is lurking over their heads and sheds its intermittent light on this waste land. She is a feminine figure, and is identified with Diana, the Queen of the Woods, to whom human victims were sacrificed. At the end of *In Parenthesis*, the soldiers will die in her grove. Now in Biez Wood, they get acquainted with the hazards of war, and they have joined the community of “professed” soldiers. They are like monks who after their noviciate are worthy of their profession of religious vows. Talking of these men, David Jones writes: “The ritual of their parading was fashioned to austerity, and bore a new directness.”

4/ This “new directness” leads to a *baptism of fire* on Christmas Day (25 Dec. 1916) in Part IV. For the first time the troops are under fire; and from the trenches they can see Biez Wood, close to Mametz Wood, the place of their future immolation. This is a grim baptism, fraught with ominous signs. First, it takes place in a Waste Land or King Pellam’s Laund, (which is the title David Jones borrowed from *Le Morte d’Arthur* and gave this section). Furthermore, this baptism ironically takes place on Christmas Day: in the trenches, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is already seen as the victim to be sacrificed on the cross on Good Friday. One is also reminded of the baptism inaugurated by Christ, when it is said that he will baptize in Spirit and fire. By fire Jesus meant the Holy Spirit; but here, the troops are baptized in the fire of guns and rifles. In fact, they are baptized in death.

5/ The last three parts of *In Parenthesis* make up the liturgy of immolation. It starts in Part V with a vigil. The battalion are at rest behind the lines. The mood is grimly

jolly, as they know this is only a short respite; and they are bracing themselves for the assault. The hour of their sacrifice is drawing near, and the vigil ends with the evocation of “their place of rendez-vous”, that is their rendez-vous with death.

6/ The last stage but one of this war liturgy shows the *victims' surrender*. The troops are marching up to the frontline. The last preparations, “the concentration in the valley”, the last supper eaten by the soldiers “trussed-up in battle-order”, the sound of guns, all these are signs of the imminent slaughter. “Some time during the night they were moved by a guide into their own assembly positions”, David Jones writes at the end of this section. They do not complain. They walk obediently to their death, like lambs to the slaughter-house. At the very end of *In Parenthesis*, David Jones refers to the sacrifice of the Lamb in the Old and New Testaments, mentions the Suffering Servant in the book of Isaiah, and Christ who willingly lays down His life. Like Christ, these men are “mild and meek”. The Suffering Servant has become the Suffering Soldier.

7/ The victim's immolation constitutes the final stage of this liturgy, (in Part VII). Early in July 1916, (that is at the start of the battle of the Somme) the infantrymen are led to “death's sure meeting place, the goal of their marching”, “a meeting place has been found”. That place is Mametz Wood where most of the soldiers are wounded or killed: John Ball is hit in the leg, Dai Great-Coat is blown to bits, Mr. Jenkins is shot in the head, and the whole place is strewn with dead bodies. It is a corporate slaughter, Mametz Wood becomes a sacred wood dedicated to the Queen of the Woods, to whom the men are sacrificed.

Now it is essential that the sacrifice be accepted by the god or goddess. Here, this acceptance is made clear by the handing out of boughs and flowers to the dead. The Queen of the Woods walks about the battlefield and gratifies each dead soldier with berries, sweet-briar, myrtle or daisies. These gifts are like palms given to martyrs in the Christian tradition.

The “doing” of this liturgy is now complete.

II A Liturgy is something “said”.

Its phrasing must have a formal design, which makes for the unity of the performance. We remember that the dramatization was made one by the progress of the troops along a seven-action scheme; likewise the “saying” is given a backbone, thanks to the seven opening quotations, that bind together the seven parts of *In Parenthesis*. They all come from the same old Welsh poem, *Y Goddodin*, attributed to Aneirin (6th century). This poem is no epic poem, but a “succession of lyrical laments on the disastrous issue of the battle” of Catraeth (perhaps Catterick in Yorkshire). The subtitle of *In Parenthesis* is a line from *Y Goddodin*: “His sword rang in mothers' heads”. This is the leitmotif of *In Parenthesis*.

We have already noticed that the victim of the sacrifice was a corporate victim, and the “doing” was a corporate action; similarly the “saying” is a composite discourse, made up of a multiplicity of styles, moods, voices, allusions, quotations, and evocations. We remember that David Jones has “shaped” and “made” a dramatic “construct”, he has also “made” a word fabric, which at first reading may look like a hotchpotch, but in fact consists in a skilfully dovetailing of concrete data, literary allusions and mythical evocations.

The recurrent, graphic renderings of the war experience are so many stays and braces in the poem. They consist of vignettes or tableaux of the many situations the

infantrymen found themselves in. David Jones draws on slang, songs, military jargon; he records conversations, describes landscapes, reports tragic or comic circumstances. For that purpose he coins words and phrases, resorts to free verse to create a rhythm that suits the reality of war and possesses a musical quality, which could be described as some harmonious disharmony. David Jones manages to make the past alive and present: he turns “then” into “now”. Let us not forget that for him a liturgy is not the mere recording of some event, but an action which is operative now. *In Parenthesis* is not written in memory, but in remembrance of the war. David Jones, who was a convert to Roman Catholicism, draws on the liturgy of the Eucharist: in it the Last Supper is re-presented, i.e. made present. This theological operation is called an “anamnesis”. According to David Jones, an “anamnesis” recalls “an event of the past so that it becomes here and now operative by its effects.” *In Parenthesis* is an “anamnesis” of the war.

The many objective data scattered about in *In Parenthesis* make a firm mesh which is interwoven with a mythical web. For David Jones a “myth”, or “mythos”, is “a word uttered”, “something told. Then we should rightly speak of the myth of the Evangel.” *In Parenthesis* can be regarded as a mythical liturgy, in the sense that it is “a word uttered”, “something told”; and what it tells is not merely the experience of the 1914-18 war, but the experience of War as a Sacrifice. Consequently, the scope of this liturgy is timeless and limitless; and its “saying” includes old legends, old romances, chronicles and poems. This permanent recalling of ancient writings turns *In Parenthesis* into a literary ‘anamnesis’. “Now” is suffused with “then”, “now” is informed by “then”.

This synthesis of time, operative throughout *In Parenthesis*, is most significant at the very core of the poem, at the centre of Part IV. This passage is known as “the boast of Dai Great-coat”. Dai (Welsh for David, nicknamed Great-coat), is a private in the trenches. And he boasts he was with Abel and Cain, with David who fought against Goliath, with Longinus at the foot of the cross when Jesus died, with King Arthur; he prides himself on being Socrates, or Roland at Roncesvalles... His boast goes on and on. It sounds extravagant; but Dai is no real braggart. Actually David Jones resorts to a literary genre common in ancient Welsh poetry, such as *Câd Goddeu* (the Battle of Trees). David Jones uses this so-called boast as an ‘anamnesis’ of the soldier through the ages: Dai embodies, or re-presents, or makes present, all men who fought and often died on battlefields. He is the living archetype of the soldier of now and always.

This technique does not result in some multi-layered, static patchwork. It creates an interplay of quotations, hints and images which, interspersed with the objective data from the war, make a multiplicity of voices and echoes, and bring about a constant shifting of points of view. *In Parenthesis* is the result of a montage, which keeps the reader or the listener (actually *In Parenthesis* should be read aloud) on the alert. His mind cannot remain passively receptive; it must be prepared to jump from a quotation from Shakespeare to a borrowing from the *Mabinogion*, from the Bible to *Le Morte d'Arthur*, from Christ to Balder, the German god of oak and lightning. So one must be prepared to re-focus one’s attention on constantly changing effects. Thus, the reader contributes to the making and working of the liturgy. And this is how it should be: one is not supposed to attend a liturgy, but to take an active part in its “doing” and “saying”. A liturgy is a corporate action.

By transmuting his war experience into a sacrificial war liturgy, David Jones has fulfilled the purpose he mentioned in *Epoch and Artist*: “Man is of his essential nature a ‘poeta’, one who makes things that are ‘signs’ of something.” *In Parenthesis* is the handiwork of a “poeta”, or “artifex”, who has succeeded in making a

construction which is an “objective correlative” of the first world war. He owes a debt to James Joyce, and to the Imagists, in particular to Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot who wrote a preface to *In Parenthesis*. We must not forget that David Jones was also a painter and engraver, and had studied the technique of the Post-Impressionists, as it was analysed by T.E. Hulme and Roger Fry.

Above all, David Jones aims at grasping and unveiling the “truth” of war, the “reality” of war, the “inscape” of war, as Gerald Manley Hopkins, whom David Jones admired, might have said. For David Jones this “truth” of war is not merely conveyed by the description of the Tommies’ experience, because “the essential reality... lies behind the appearance of things.” David Jones has defined the reality of war as Sacrifice. In war poetry the sacrifice of soldiers is a commonplace theme, but he has given a “significant form” to those numberless sacrifices. By blending together war experience, sacrificial myths, and the matter of Britain, he has shaped a meaningful war liturgy.