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Catholic Elegance and Joy Transcript

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Christian Faith and Modern Art: Catholic Elegance and Joy

Professor Rt Rvd Lord Harries of Pentregarth

Eric Gill, 1882-1940

Portrait

Eric Gill trained at Chichester Art and Technical School and then started to train as an architect in London. At the same time he took evening classes in both stone cutting and calligraphy. In 1903 he gave up architecture to concentrate on these skills and he became the most influential calligrapher, letter cutter and type designer of the 20th century. Here are examples of some of his type faces- Perpetua, which he cut himself for a memorial, and Gill Sans.

Eve, 1929

Study for the wind

Prospero and Ariel

Gill was influenced by the sculpture on South Indian temples, as well as the Indian writer Ananda Coomaraswamy, and these influences allied to his vast sexual appetite gave much of his work a highly sensual quality. His highly active sex life, unconventional, immoral and illegal, is beyond the scope of this study, except for the point that a sensual elegance permeated all his work.^[1] He moved to Ditchling in 1907 and after the end of World War I founded a Catholic artistic community, the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic. The name is significant. Joseph was a carpenter, and Gill highly prized the basic skills of making. St Dominic, is the founder of the Dominican order, whose vocation includes intellectual work. Gill was much influenced by the Catholic philosopher Jaques Maritain in his approach to art, and he himself wrote a great deal on the subject. In 1924 Gill and the community moved to Capel-y-Fynn, in the Black Mountains, and then in 1928 to Piggotts, a house in Speen, near High Wycombe, where amongst other work Eric set up a press. As well as number memorials, Gill did some major public sculpture, such as three of the eight studies of wind for what is now St James's Park Underground Station, where Epstein's work also appears. However his best known sculpture is of Prospero and Ariel on Broadcasting House in Langham Place. Carved in the late 1920's. There was a row over the size Ariel's genitals and Gill was forced to make it smaller

Jesus and Veronica

Gill's best known religious work is his stations of the cross which he did for Westminster Cathedral in 1914. A word about his religious journey. Gill's father was originally ordained as a congregational minister, but rebelling against the doctrine of hell joined the Countess of Huntingdon's Connection, a small sect that had separated from the Church of England but kept the prayer book. He then moved once again to become ordained in the Church of England. Eric Gill was one of a very large, poor but basically happy family, for whom religion was fundamental and taken for granted. When he joined the architect's office however he became a free thinker, as it was called. His journey to Roman Catholicism and how it was integrated into his whole view of life is told in his autobiography. Here he makes great play of making up a new religion for himself and then discovering that it had been there all the time in the form of Roman Catholicism. Amongst all the rather playful, paradoxical, unconvincing reasons he gives for becoming a Catholic what is clear looking at it from the outside is that Gill was by temperament and upbringing a deeply religious person. And what Monsignor Ronald Knox said about himself, referring to his relationship to his evangelical bishop father, is true of Gill. "I must have a religion and it must be different from that of my father." In short there needs to be both continuity and discontinuity with our religious upbringing. His whole being was obviously moving in the direction of Catholicism for some time, drawn no doubt above all by its sacramental view of life, the way it held together the material and the spiritual. In the end it was hearing some plainsong in a Belgium monastery that convinced him. As he put it

I knew, infallibly, that God existed and God was a living God-just as I knew him in the answering smile of a child or in the living words of Christ. ^[2]

Gill experienced life with extraordinary intensity, and sometimes the strength of his perception almost knocked him over. One such moment was the first time he saw his friend and mentor engaged in calligraphy. As he wrote

I did not know such beauties could exist. I was struck as by lightning, as by a sort of enlightenment...there are many occasions when, in a manner of speaking, you seem to pierce the cloud of unknowing and for a brief second seem to know even as God knows-sometimes when you are drawing the human body, even the turn of a shoulder or the firmness of a waist, it seems to shine with the radiance of righteousness.^[3]

It should also be noted that his Catholicism not only shaped his art, but his whole philosophy of life, leading him to be fiercely anti-capitalist.

Crucifix, 1910, Tate

Crucifix, 1913, Tate
Madonna and child, now in Glastonbury
Crucifix, print 1926, Tate
Crucifix, chalice and host, print, 1915, Tate

Gill did many other religious carvings, crucifixes, and Madonnas, using traditional imagery. Some of the imagery is specifically designed to reinforce Catholic teaching and often uses imagery from the mediaeval period.

Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday
Jesus on the tree of Jesse
The Shepherds worship the infant Jesus
The wise men bring their gifts to the infant Jesus.

Gill also did many drawings, as well as the calligraphy for a Bible that is elegant and highly striking. Here are a few examples from "The Four Gospels" done in 1931.

How are we to assess Eric Gill today? First, since the publication of Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Gill in 1989, based on his highly intimate personal diaries there is the old debate about the relationship between art and an artist's personal morality, pressing in the case of Gill as to how he related his omnivorous sexual appetite to his Roman Catholicism. But I will have to leave that debate aside for now. Secondly, it is obvious that Gill was highly talented, with an extraordinary capacity for elegance of line in all his work. He combined this, as we have seen, with recognizably traditional imagery. Thirdly, it is clear from everyone who encountered Gill that he was a quite extraordinary and fascinating person, who stood bravely in the face of the main trends of his time. He loathed capitalism, and believed in simple living and solid craftsmanship. Though he recognised his dependence on the art world to make a living, he despised the art for arts sake of the artistic elite of the time. He regarded all such art as simply an excrescence on the capitalism of the time, an art which was also infected by its false values. But is this enough to make him a significant religious artist in the 20th century, when the whole tradition of both belief and imagery had fragmented so badly? Does his work speak religiously to us? The best person to answer that question is David Jones.

Jesus receives his cross, Westminster

David Jones joined the Catholic fraternity with Eric Gill at Piggotts and then Capel-y-fynn, and Gill was a huge influence on him. But that influence did not affect the balance of Jones's judgement about Gill as an artist. He recognised that Gill was superbly talented as a letterer, and that there is a wonderful linearity in all his work. But he did not think he was a great artist. This had less to do with any shortcomings in Gill than the cultural situation in which all artists then and now find themselves. For, as we shall see when discussing Jones's own work, and as he put it in his essay on Gill, the best artists produce their work unselfconsciously because they are integrated into a wider culture. Such a culture no longer exists, and the artist today is an "agreeable extra" not an integral part of a wider cultural world. Jones thought that Gill because of his talent produced work that looked as though it might be the product of a true culture-but it wasn't. Indeed Gill himself recognised this. As remembered by Jones he in effect said, "What I achieved as a sculptor is of no consequence-I can only be a beginning-it will take generations, but if only the beginnings of a reasonable, decent, holy tradition of working might be effected-that is the thing."[\[4\]](#)

The other lack may have been Gill's steady focus on the linear, rather than working in the round, and his overriding commitment to sheer elegance of line. Was this because of a reluctance to face fully the darkness and lostness of our time? Ours is not a time when all can be gathered into an elegant unity. So Jones wrote "I do not think that one could say that the Stations at Westminster are profound works of sculpture, but they are adequate and right and the most live things in that fine interior and No. 12 in particular has great feeling and is a true icon."[\[5\]](#)

In the end Jones gives a generous tribute to Gill "The astonishing thing is that within certain bounds, and in spite of all deficiencies, he achieved what he did achieve-the relative success is the surprise, not the obvious limitations."[\[6\]](#) If Gill was aware of the limited achievement of his own art, he was no less generous and perceptive in his judgement about that of David Jones. Once, round a crowded dining table Gill remarked "We have been talking a lot about art but there is only one real artist in the room" and he then pointed to David Jones.[\[7\]](#)

David Jones (1895-1974)

Portrait-Dai Greatcoat

David Jones was brought up in South London but his father's side were Welsh, and this became of fundamental importance for both his art and poetry. He went first to Camberwell Art School but in 1915 enlisted in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. This was one of the three decisive experiences of his life and from it came, but it not until 20 years after, in 1937, his 126 page poem, In Parenthesis. This has an introduction by T.S.Eliot in which he wrote "On reading the book in typescript I was deeply moved. I then regarded it, and I still regard it, as a work of genius." Its central figure is Dai Greatcoat, the ordinary soldier in every battle in history, a name Jones gave for himself and the title of his published letters.

Madonna and Child, 1921

After the war he went to Westminster School of Art, and though admiring of Walter Sickert who taught there,

did not really fit in and in 1921 went to Ditchling in Sussex to visit Eric Gill in whom he recognised a true master like William Morris. This immediately points to the other two formative experiences-his conversion to Roman Catholicism and his influence by and work with Eric Gill.

David Jones was brought up in a devout Anglican home but during the war he became “inwardly a catholic” got into the habit of slipping into Mass when in Westminster and formally converted in 1921.

The Dancing Bear

David Jones had a natural talent which his mother who, had also drawn in her younger days encouraged. This is a drawing he did at the age of 7. He said drawing was as natural to him as stroking a cat, and he decided at that age to be an artist. But there were other important influences in the family. His father was a printer’s overseer concerned with the appearance of the printed page, and a grandfather a mast-and-block maker. This craft side of him found expression when he first went to Eric Gill at Ditchling. Gill told him “to start again with something that can be done with reasonable certainty” and set him work as a carpenter making looms.

Jesus mocked 1922/3

At Ditchling David Jones became part of The Craft Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic, a community of Dominican tertiaries which had been founded in 1919 by Hilary Pepler and Eric Gill “as a religious fraternity for those who make things with their hands.” Jones was put to work making looms. This was a life not only of work but of corporate prayer, with a philosophy of art shaped by the Catholic philosopher Jaques Maritain. Jones was no great shakes as a carpenter, but the community was a pioneer in wood engraving and this became a natural medium for Jones. Wood engraving has the advantage of making the artist responsible for the whole process, there are no middle men, and it forces a respect for the medium as Gill put it. It had the further advantage for Jones of delivering him from the easy realism into which his natural talent flowed, to focus on the essential feeling, as expressed in line and shape, of what he was conveying.

The Flight to Egypt, 1924

Engraving for the Book of Jonah, 1926

Petra

The Garden enclosed, 1924

Jones lived with the Gill family first at Ditchling, then at Capel-y-fynn in the Black Mountains, and then at their house Piggots near High Wycome in Buckinghamshire. He fell in love with Gill’s daughter Petra and they were engaged for three years, but then she married someone else. We see here an example of how Jones’s religious themes permeate all his paintings. The title refers to Song of Solomon, 4, 12 “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse”-a familiar image for the Virgin Mary, Geese, sacred to Juno sound the alarm, a doll thrown down, indicates the end of childhood.

Y Twmpa, Nant Honddu

Capel-y-fynn is a wonderful spot in the heart of the Black Mountains, near the ruins of the ancient abbey of Llanthony. There was another religious house in the valley, and it was there that Gill and his entourage, including Jones, moved in 1924 to continue their community life of craft and prayer. It was here that Jones really discovered himself as a painter, not in oils, which was never his preferred medium but in a mixture of water colour and pen and ink. The contours of the hills and valleys and flowing streams took shape in his artistic imagination.

The Waterfall, Afon Honddu Fach, 1926.

For him landscape was always sacramental, an outward and visible manifestation of the divine glory. So where others see just landscape, he sees Christ. This is made clear in his later poem, Anathemata

Stands a lady
on a mountain
who she is
they could not know.
His waters were in her pail
her federal waters ark’d him.
He by whom the welling *fontes*
are from his paradise-font mandated
to make Gwenfrewi’s glen, Dyfredwy
to crystal his ferned Hodni dell
dewy for the Dyfrwr
by this preclear and innocent creature.[8]

This needs some explanation. Hodni is the same river as the Honddu after which Llanthony is named, and an earlier writer speaks of St David drinking of the “crystal Hodni”. The stream is crystal clear, its banks are ferny and David had a cell there. Y Dyfrwr is the Welsh word for waterman and David is called David the waterman. This 1952 poem is prefigured in his earlier landscapes like this one, and in it is one of Jones’s overriding themes, landscape seen through the eyes of Christian belief and Welsh history or legend.

Sanctus Christus de Capel-y-fynn, 1925

Not so much a painting of the crucifixion scene as a wayside shrine in the Black Mountains, Christ's limbs are like the branches of a tree. His later lettering originated within paintings like this.

The artist, 1927

From time to time Jones went to stay with the monks in Caldey island, and did some memorable scenes of the coast and sea. Here he imagines himself in the scriptorium, like a medieval limner copying ancient manuscripts, the hand of God above blessing his work, surrounded by animals. As in his landscapes the sense of enclosure and the opening up to what is above and around interpenetrate one another.[\[9\]](#)

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, The Albatross 1929

Copper engraving. The albatross on the mast, the cross of Christ, is an image of his sacrifice. As Jones made clear, the ship is the church and the voyage the journey of everyone, for which the sacrifice of the mass pleads.

Nativity with Shepherds and beasts rejoicing, 1930

The Terrace, 1929

Manawydan's glass door, 1931

It is possible for people to look at a Jones painting and say, "That's very pretty", or attractive or whatever and move on. That is a pity. First, Jones was a modernist, influenced not just in the early stage of his artistic life by Gill but one with the leading avant-garde names of the time with whom his work was exhibited as a member of the Seven and Five Society to which he was elected. He kept in touch with London and what was going on there. Indeed there are aspects of his work which seem related to Cezanne, Nash and Ben Nicholson, and the surrealists, amongst others.[\[10\]](#) But all the time there is his own distinctive vision and individual style. That vision was, in a word, sacramental, he saw the outward and material reflecting the invisible and spiritual, and he had an equally intense passion for both the material and the spiritual. He wanted to express the universal through the particular. [\[11\]](#) The challenge for him was how to achieve this. To do justice to the spiritual he needed to eschew realism. As he lamented to one friend "Isn't it awful these yards of 'able'[\[12\]](#) paintings of various kinds that seem only seen with the eye of the flesh".....Yet, abstraction took him away from the particular which always so excited him. He writes in one letter about being demented trying to capture the beauty of a new garden, on which he had made four or five attempts. His solution was to go for water colour, but in a highly distinctive way. First, with a strong grounding of white, which gave the painting a translucent character. Then, to use drawing not just as a preparation for the painting, as painters since the Renaissance have tended to do, but as an essential aspect of the painting itself. Finally, though his use of line work, to give a sense of fluidity and movement to the whole. As Paul Hill puts it about an early painting but which is applicable to his oeuvre. The organization of shapes is not the sole source of unity

The individual marks of pencil and brush share a distinctive character, irregular yet rhythmic, tremulous yet bold... individually these marks may appear graceless, undisciplined, even messy; yet at the right distance they signal across the paper in vibrant patterns. The matrix of white paper is crucial to this essentially linear art; the character of each touch must tell.[\[13\]](#)

He took to heart the post-modernist dictum that a painting should not be an impression of anything but existing in its own right. But what he wanted to exist in its own right he wanted to show as imbued with a greater reality, a something more, "an excess".

In addition to these essentially technical accomplishments is added the matter of content, the way he imbues his paintings with historical or mythical significance. This is true even here, for the title Manwydan refers to a figure in the Mabinogion, the collection of Welsh Folk tales who shut himself away from passing time and the harsh reality of the world. When he eventually went through the door to take up his responsibilities he experienced the pain and sorrow of the world again. It seems no accident that it was at this time Jones wrote In Parenthesis. Here the pattern of the carpet flows into the blood red sea anemones of the shore. The ocean gives the feeling of rocking on a ship, yet the frame of the window gives a sense of stillness and stability in the midst of movement- and the ship of life sails onward. All in all, as he put it about his paintings

I should like to speak of a quality which I rather associate with the folk-tales of Welsh or Celtic derivation, a quality congenial and significant to me which in some oblique way has some connection with what I want in painting. I find it impossible to define, but it has to do with a certain affection for the innate creatureliness of things- a care for, and appreciation of the particular genius of places, men, trees, animals, and yet with a pervading sense of metamorphosis and mutability. That trees are men walking, That words "bind and loose material things"[\[14\]](#) He went on to refer to the Alice books to indicate how things can be metamorphosed in strange, haunting ways. Jones certainly had a strong sense of place and indeed almost thought in terms of the spirit or spirits of the place, but in Christian terms, especially Mary. But this was linked to his sense that everything is on the move, on the way, being changed.

Epiphany 1941: Britannia and Germania embracing

Jones did a frontpiece for In Parenthesis that showed a common soldier like John Bunyan's Pilgrim bearing his burden and an endpiece that showed a lamb or perhaps a scapegoat caught in a crown of thorns made of barbed wire. It was dedicated, amongst others to "the enemy front fighters who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure". Epiphany 1941 is inscribed "O sisters two what may we do" a line taken from the Coventry Carol which was associated with the massacre of the innocents, obviously referring to the

destruction of Coventry Cathedral by German bombs in November 1940. The spire of the cathedral is on the left. Germania wears antlers, as they were by mummers enacting the sacrifice of the tree God according to German folk tales. The dogs howl and the birds whirl overhead, but a lighthouse blinks steadily. Not long before the war, the lighthouse had been added to penny coins, so it serves here as a sign of Britannia and of the Virgin Mary, *The Stella Maris*, "Day star o' the harbour" (The Anthemata p. 195) and Eliot's "Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory." (The Dry Salvages, IV)

Aphrodite in Aulis 1941

Originally called simply Aphrodite, Jones then took Euripides title "Iphigenia in Aulis" and changed it. Highly complex symbolism.

"My intention in changing Aphrodite in the title was to include all female cult figures...the figure is all goddesses rolled into one-wounded of necessity as are all things worthy of our worship-she's mother-figure and *virgo inter virgins*-the pierced woman and mother and all her foretypes"[\[15\]](#) He then gives examples of these. The moon and stars are attributes of the Madonna in Revelation-doves sacred to Aphrodite. They add "their chorus to the confusion of sacred and physical love which is the essential theme."[\[16\]](#) Mixture of architectural styles to show she belongs to all ages-marble goddess in the sacred enclosure. The pictorial clue is crucifixion-lance of Longinus-German soldier. Statue cracked and broken. And the Mass, the lamb bleeds into the chalice. Soldiers on both sides are united in a love that is both sacred and profane. Rooted in his own experience-of universal meaning.

Vexilla Regis 1947

In 1947 he suffered the second of his major but mysterious breakdowns. During long months in the nursing home started to draw trees in the grounds, trees important to him since he was wounded in World War I and as reflected in In Parenthesis. *Vexilla Regis*, is full of complex symbolism which he explained in a long letter to a friend but indicating it was all fluid and could not be tied down. But the essential theme is the cross of Christ as a great tree, the theme of the great 4th century hymn *Vexilla Regis*-but this tree grows out of a collapsing Roman world. Cavalry horses let loose, armour lying around. The tree on the right at once the tree of the bad thief and a Roman column, with a dove above it indicating this too could be redeemed. The other... tree with a Pelican.

Glass chalice and mug, 1952

Chalice with flowers, 1950

Flora in Calix-light, 1950

After his breakdown in 1947 he wanted to stay near the nursing home where he had been treated. The house where he lodged, Northwick Lodge, remained his home until 1964. Here he began to draw again and in particular did a large number of drawing of flowers in a glass on his table. He liked the word calix because of its link with chalice, and he liked the image of water as both the origin of life and the water of baptism. Kenneth Clark wrote in 1967

"Some of the finest of David Jones's recent paintings are not of literary subjects..but represent a simple glass of flowers on a table. A pleasant subject; but we are not for long under the illusion that this is an ordinary "still life". He then refers to the imagery, chalice, altar, the different colours of the flowers representing parts of the Eucharist. "Every flower is there for a dozen reasons, visual, iconographical, or even on account of its name, and how far they can be interpreted as Christian imagery no one, perhaps not even the painter can tell."[\[17\]](#)

Paul Hills comments:

"Though he was to paint for another ten years, the chalice drawings represent a peak that David Jones never surpassed. In them the universal shines forth from the particular; through visible forms we are caught up into love of things invisible."[\[18\]](#) He quotes some words of Jones himself:

"Cezanne said we must 'Do Poussin again after nature' Perhaps we might almost say that we must do Cezanne's apples again after the nature of Julian of Norwich's little nut, which 'endureth and ever shall for God loveth it'"[\[19\]](#)

Rowan Williams referring to a painting of Jones translated into English as *The Annunciation* has commented in relation to the chalice paintings

"at this level, there is no real difference between this explicitly religious picture and 'Flora in Calix-Light. This is how you paint 'excess': by the delicate superimposing of nets of visual material in a way that teases constantly by simultaneously refusing a third dimension and insisting that there is no way of reading the surface at once. As in the Byzantine icon, visual depth gives way to the time take to 'read' a surface: you cannot construct a single consistent illusion of depth as you look, and so you are obliged to trace and re-trace the intersecting linear patterns."[\[20\]](#)

Here lies Arthur the once and future king

From the 1940s Jones experimented with inscriptions, not to imitate any style in the past but to express his own vision. This is a fairly early one from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. The concept of the Once and Future King was one of the myths that permeated his work. It has been well said of the inscriptions

"He is a bard, 'a carpenter of stone' and a celebrant. He was a maker of shapes and forms and in the

inscriptions were often useful artifacts as well as pure art, devotional aids used like 'mass cards on the altar...to help him through his daily office." Jones had bridged the gap between the Ditchling ethos and the more abstract art of his contemporaries and he did it without losing sight of his civilizational predicament, for the letters which make up the inscriptions often appear embattled, a purely formal expression of struggle and loss."[\[21\]](#)

Mehefin, 1949

Portrait of a maker, 1932

His understanding of art

For David Jones the whole of life was sacramental. That is, outward and visible things body forth what is invisible and spiritual. The whole universe is a sacrament. In the words of another poet "It is charged with the grandeur of God". What distinguishes humans from other animals is that "man is unavoidably a sacramentalist and his works are sacramental in character"[\[22\]](#) Without this prior belief the Christian sacraments, in the technical sense of the word, have no meaning. Nor can any sense be made of the arts. Within this sacramental world, a fundamental distinction can be made between objects made for a practical purpose, which are useful for something, and works of art, which have no practical purpose. Jones calls this a distinction between utile and extra-utile. He contrasts the ordered line of a Roman legion, which has a definite purpose, and the ordered line of a hexameter which is "a thing wholly extra-utile and explicable only as a sign."[\[23\]](#) He also makes a further distinction between *prudentia* and *ars*. *Prudentia* involves the motives and intentions of the person making things. It concerns the character we are forming through our actions. But *ars* is not concerned with character but solely with the actual work of art.[\[24\]](#)

But what is it that makes a particular production a work of art? It is first of all the element of pure form. It is important to remember that Jones was and remained all his life, both in his painting and poetry, a modern, understood as someone concerned above all with form. He thought a human being is essentially a seeker of form, *venator formarum* and he referred to the splendour of forms. He was in the 1930's a member of the "7 and 5", the elite group who had to be fully committed to abstract art to be elected a member. Although his art, like others we shall discuss in later lectures, moved on, to the end of his life he defended purely abstract art. He thought that all art from the Lascaux cave paintings which he much admired, through the intricate designs on the swords of the La Tene Celtic culture, to his own later paintings which ostensibly deal with objects, had this element of formalism and it was this which defined them as works of art. He also believed that objects made for a useful purpose could have an element of form. Most obviously bridges, let us say, can be beautiful. This brings out the other essential distinguishing feature of a work of art. It is not only characterised by form, it has no utilitarian purpose and exists only as a sign.

Again, this sign making has a wider reference. For human beings are essentially sign makers. Most obviously we give someone a bunch of flowers or a kiss as a sign. So what are works of art a sign of? Here we come across the great crisis with which Jones wrestled both in his writing and his art. For he believed, and he said this view was shared by his contemporaries in the 1930's, that the 19th century experienced what he called "The Break".[\[25\]](#) By this he meant two things. First, the dominant cultural and religious ideology that had unified Europe for more than a 1000 years, no longer existed. All that was left were fragmentary individual visions. Secondly, the world was now dominated by technology, so that the arts seemed to be marginalised. They had no use in such a society, and their previous role as signs no longer had any widespread public resonance. Their work was "idiosyncratic and personal in expression and experimental in technique, intimate and private rather than public and corporate."[\[26\]](#) "The priest and the artist are already in the catacombs, but *separate* catacombs, for the technician divides to rule"[\[27\]](#) There was no corporate tradition and one could not be looked for without a renewal of the whole culture. Writing after World War II he remarked that the situation at that time was even more pronounced and dire than it had seemed in the 1930's.[\[28\]](#)

This general understanding of the arts and their role in society was for him focussed and underpinned by his Christian and specifically Roman Catholic faith, which came together in his understanding of the nature of art. There was for him a personal revelation when just before and after the first world war he came to understand the meaning of post impressionism. It made him realise that art was not meant to be an impression of something any more than it was meant to be a representation of something. It was a work in its own right "re-presenting" something in the medium of paint or stone or whatever.[\[29\]](#) This was also about the time that he became a Catholic, and he came to believe that in the Mass we do not have either a representation or an impression of Christ's offering of himself once for all on the cross, but that sacrifice made present "re-presented" under the form of bread and wine. So he came to think that what happened in the Mass as it were defined and undergirded all art. That is why in all his work but particularly some of his later work it is the Eucharist which is the all pervading theme, whatever other details are present.

Nevertheless it is important to remember that for him all art had this sacramental quality for works of art "can be justified *only* as signs of something other, are evocative, are incantive and have the power of "recalling", of "bringing to mind" -are in fact one with that whole world of sign or sacrament whether it be the flowers sent to Clio on her birthday or the profound intention of the art of the man at the Altar, the work known as anamnesis, "an effectual recalling".[\[30\]](#)

In case all this sounds too heavy, Jones believed that the first requirement of a work of art is that it should bring delight and pleasure, and he links this with Holy Wisdom playing before God before the creation of the world.[\[31\]](#) There is a gratuitousness about art, a sheer givenness which is to be appreciated and enjoyed for its own sake.

But in addition to the form of a work of art which for Jones was paramount, there are many details present, often for modern taste far too many. There are three reasons for this. First, although Jones was a very definite and convinced Catholic, his faith could not have been more inclusive. It included, in anticipatory or fragmentary ways, all religions, all myths whether secular or religious, and all cultural history. All was gathered up, unified and underpinned in the Christian story.

Secondly, given his belief, Jones had confidence to include in his poetry and painting all that was of interest to him, everything that was lying about in his mind. He quotes the early British historian Nennius "I have made a heap of all I could find".^[32] This included the early Welsh myths, Welsh history, the stories connected with King Arthur and mediaeval romances, together with a love of words, their sounds and multiple associations. The sounds include the slang of soldiers and London cockneys. All this could be in his mind as much when he painted as when he wrote poetry.

Thirdly, he believed that an artist must live in association with the art and culture of the past, and although he recognised the present time was a desert as far as that was concerned, he saw it as his vocation to try to keep alive the culture that had once unified Europe. He was not an antiquarian or one who wanted to hold on to the past for its own sake. On the contrary, he passionately believed that an artist had to be of the age, and for him that meant being a modern. The artists he admired, were the makers of modernism, such as Joyce in the novel and Eliot in poetry, whose work reflected the broken cultural world in which we live. But again like them he thought they were able to be of their age, precisely because they were deeply in touch with the world that had passed. However acutely aware he was of the crisis of our times, as he wrote in one of his poems "I have been on my guard to not condemn the unfamiliar...for it is easy to miss him at the turn of a civilisation."^[33] He thought that the debate about abstract art was missing the point, for "The one common factor implicit in all the arts of man resides in a certain juxtaposition of forms"^[34] With that in mind he said, we can then go on and ask what possible "aridities or impoverishments" may or may not be present in what was called pure abstraction.

Jones was a modernist and continued to be so in two senses. First, he never lost his overriding concern as an artist for sheer form. However crowded in detail are his paintings and indeed his poetry, he conceived them with a view to their integrative form. Secondly, he continued to believe that however much we may feel the loss of a previous culture, an artist had to be at the heart of their own time, even if that time was characterised by a loss of overall meaning. What this meant in practice is that when his art became counter-modernist, it had something of the character of the arts he most admired in the past. We see what these were for example in his poem "Anathemata" in his passage on the art of pre-classical Greece, that is the 6th and 7th centuries BC which he admires.

And the Delectable Kore:
by the radial flutes for her chiton, the lineal chiselled hair
the contained rhythm of her...

He then goes on to evoke her as the archetype of all beautiful women in myth until, as he puts it

Not again, not now again
till on west-portals
in Gallia Lugdunensis
When the Faustian Lent is come
and West-wood springs new
(and Christ the thrust of it!)

What he is in fact doing is jumping from the archaic period in Greece to the Romanesque and early Gothic carvings on the West Fronts of European Cathedrals, bypassing classical art. It was the combination of the formal element, of conscious stylisation, with an element of the representational that he seemed to admire. It was only something like that which could act as a sign of something other. We see this too in his essay on the ancient statue at Pergamon "The dying Gaul" and its affinity with Celtic art in which he writes of a carved stone head of that period that it is "it is illustrative of the continuous characteristic Celtic tendency to transmogrify observed objects (in this case elements of the human face) by the use of stylised motifs which none the less retain a powerful representational significance within a dynamic abstract form." ^[35]

We see a good example of approach at work in his painting "Human Being" (1931) which both is and is not a self-portrait and again "Portrait of a maker" (1932) For these are not in fact portraits as we normally understand them. They are highly stylised to bring out particular points.^[36] "The human being, suspended between maturity and childhood, is also suspended between individuality and archetype." We notice the prominence given to the ears, the eyes looking elsewhere, the prominent delicate hands of a maker.

In terms of specific examples this understanding of art meant for example that a word like wood, which once had huge cultural resonance in relation to the wood of the cross, now for most people had none, yet David Jones felt it his vocation to be in touch with that tradition in a modern way. This was true not only of his poetry but his painting. "If one is making a painting of daffodils, what is *not* instantly involved? Will it make a difference whether or no we have heard of Perspephone or Flora or Blodeuedd? He asserts it does make a difference but for those who have not heard of them they would in fact paint daffodils "as though they had invoked her name."^[37]

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- [1]The full story of Eric Gill's sexual life is disclosed in Fiona MacCarthy Eric Gill, Faber and Faber, 1989
- [2]Eric Gill, Autobiography, Kessinger Publishing Rare Reprints, originally published in 1941 by Devin-Adair, NY.p.193/4
- [3]Autobiography, p.119
- [4]David Jones, "Eric Gill as sculptor" (1941) in Epoch and Artist" Faber, 2008, p.295
- [5]*ibid.* p.292
- [6]*ibid.* p.295
- [7]Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel, David Jones:the maker unmade, Seren, p.51
- [8]The Ananthemata, p. 235
- [9]Anne Price-Owen, Matrerialising the Immaterial, David Jones:Painter-Poet, a helpful introduction available on the internet by the Director of the David Jones Society who has written extensively on him.
- [10]This, as well as other matters, are explored in the excellent introduction by Paul Hills, to the retrospective exhibition catalogue, David Jones, Tate Gallery, 1981
- [11]Eric Gill, Last Essays, 1942,p. 150-2
- [12]Dai Greatcoat, p.46
- [13]Paul Hills, p.25. Hills notes the influence on him of his teacher at Camberwell, A.S. Hartrick, and the artistic link with medieval scribes.
- [14]Quoted by :Paul Hills, p. 49 and associated note.
- [15]René Hague, A commentary on the Ananhemata of David Jones, Wellingborough 1977, p.38
- [16]Dai Greatcoat,p.138
- [17]Kenneth Clark in Agenda:David Jones Special Edition, 1967,pp.99-100
- [18]Hills, p.170
- [19]The Dying Gaul, p.142
- [20]Rowan Williams, Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love, Morehouse, 2005, p.69
- [21]Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel, David Jones:the Maker Unmade, p.274
- [22]David Jones, "Art and Sacrament" (1955) in Epoch and Artist, Faaber, 2008, p.155
- [23]David Jones, "Use and sign" (1962) in The Dying Gaul, Faber, 2008, p.178
- [24]The Anethemeta, p.29
- [25]The Anethemata, p.15
- [26]David Jones, "Religion and the Muses", (1941), in Epoch and artist, Faber 2008, p.98.
- [27]*ibid* p.103
- [28]David Jones, "Notes on the 1930's," (1965) The Dying Gauland other writings, Faber, 2008, p.49
- [29]Art and Sacrament, p.171/2
- [30]David Jones, "Notes on the 1930's " (1965), The Dying Gauland other writings, Faber, 2008,p.47

[31]"Art and Sacrament", p.154 and p.164

[32]David Jones, The Anthemata,(1952) Faber, 2010,p.9

[33]"Art and Sacrament" p.179

[34]"Abstract Art" in Epoch and Artist p.265

[35]David Jones, "The Dying Gaul" in The Dying Gaul, p.55

[36]They are perceptively discussed by Merlin James, David Jones, 1895-1974: A map of the artists mind, Lund Humphries/National Galleries and Museums of Wales, 1995,p.10/11

[37]The Anthemata, p.10