Symbol and Sacrament in David Jones’ *Eclogue IV*

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During the late 1920s a group of English Catholics established a short-lived but influential journal called *Order*, “dedicated,” as its editor Tom Burns noted, “to reforming the Catholic Church, at least in its local manifestation.” This reforming zeal, in turn, arose from their deep awareness of the antipathy secular modernity had for religion in general and Christianity in particular. They saw the need to challenge the ascendency of modern materialism with an alternative born of a Christian tradition at once ancient, coherent, and, in their view, life-giving. Among the members of this group were Burns, Christopher Dawson, Harman Grisewood, Eric Gill, and David Jones. Two thinkers in particular influenced the group, Dawson himself, and Jacques Maritain, who was involved in a similar group in Paris. Dawson’s argument that religion is the foundation upon which every culture is built, and his deep knowledge of the sweep of world history and culture, provided the group with a rigorous approach to philosophy, politics, and theology. Likewise, Maritain’s book *Art and Scholasticism*, built upon a fresh approach to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, significantly shaped the *Order* group’s approach to aesthetics.

In writing of the *Order* group and their work, Bradley Birzer remarks:

> [The group] took the idea of order from ... Edmund Burke, who had stressed the need for “moral imagination,” [that is,] the ability to see clearly beyond the here and now into the reality of eternal forms, thus allowing one to order one’s soul and one’s present community to the eternal community.... Beauty and imagination, [the group] believed, led to truth.... Though traditionalist and conservative in political, theological, and philosophical beliefs, the ... group demanded radically new forms of art and expression. If all things, properly understood, had an end that was good, then all new forms of art must be embraced and sanctified for a Christian purpose.²

In this approach, Birzer argues, the *Order* group made a distinction between the aesthetic form of a work of art, which could be radically new, and the

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intellectual perspective that informs it, which should be consistent with and an extension of the Western Christian tradition. Modern art generally was and is understood and critiqued from within the parameters of modern thought more broadly conceived – that is, within the worldview produced by the heritage of the Enlightenment. However, for the Order group, Maritain’s approach in *Art and Scholasticism* provided a more compelling and truthful approach to the nature and understanding of art in whatever age it is produced. They grasped the power of Thomism to illuminate the relationship between beauty and truth in any age. Drawing on their distinction between artistic form and intellectual perspective, and integrating modern forms of art within the Thomistic thought world, they were able to argue that “radically new forms of art and expression ... must be embraced and sanctified for a Christian purpose.”

This approach animated the life’s work of David Jones. He was motivated by his participation in the broad, complex spiritual *weltanschauung* of the Catholic faith, while also being profoundly shaped by the perspective of this group of friends, who in various ways and over many years shared Jones’ life and goals. The distinctions he made between the forms of modern art and the intellectual perspective which informed such work allowed him to use those forms to make artefacts, as he called them, which convey his theological and historical convictions. Thus he himself “embraced and sanctified” new forms of art for the modern era and beyond. What follows briefly delineates the relationship between Jones’ cultural concerns and his theological approach to aesthetic form, as expressed in his observation of the link between the Post-Impressionist theory that a work of art is a “thing that shows forth” and the Catholic understanding of what occurs in the consecration at Mass. The essay concludes with an analysis of his 1949 drawing, *Eclogue IV*, which helps explicate Jones’ critical and constructive appropriation of modernism within the larger framework of the Western tradition.

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3 The concerns of the Order group were, as is clear, oriented specifically toward the Western cultural tradition, although Dawson’s work also extended beyond those parameters.


5 “The dictionary defines artefact as an artificial product ... But here I confine my use of the word to those artefacts in which there is an element of the extra-utile and the gratuitous. If there is any evidence of this kind of artefacture then the artefacturer or artifex should be regarded as participating directly in the benefits of the Passion, because the extra-utile is the mark of man.” David Jones, *The Anathemata* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), 65n.