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## THE TRUTH OF ART IN DAVID JONES AND HANS-GEORG GADAMER

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***Abstract:** I shall examine the theory of art developed by David Jones, the twentieth-century Anglo-Welsh poet and artist (especially in his essay “Art and Sacrament”), in the light of a comparison with the theory of art propounded by Hans-Georg Gadamer, the twentieth-century German philosopher in the phenomenological tradition (especially his essay “Die Aktualität des Schönen”), not claiming influence, but highlighting striking parallels.*

***Keywords:** Art, phenomenology, sacramentality, symbol, truth.*

### 1. Introduction

Artist and poet David Jones and philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, working without reference to each other and possibly without knowledge of each other during the twentieth century, both developed theories of art which propose the controversial idea that art can and does express truth, albeit in its own way. This can be seen as either a departure from, or a refinement of, the aestheticist ‘art for art’s sake’ doctrine of the fin de siècle, which stressed art’s purposelessness, even if a purposelessness with an appearance of purpose, following Kant. I shall explore how, bringing different backgrounds to bear on the problem, both Jones and Gadamer find that art, while not governed by the pragmatic forms of purpose directed to

outside ends, does nevertheless express and embody truth in a way that only it can, untranslatable into conceptual language.

## **2. The Truth of Art**

David Jones was an artist and poet from London, with a Welsh father, who is known for long the long poems *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*, written in a modernist style but informed by religious content, and he is also known for his watercolours, engravings and calligraphy. Besides his artistic activities, he wrote extensively in the form of essays on subjects such as Welsh history, and British culture in its Western European context, as well as expounding a view of the theory of art which emphasised notions such as the sacramentality of art, and the human being's distinctive identity as an artist. Jones' philosophical background is Thomist, he being a Catholic convert, and his thinking on art being influenced by the neo-Thomist philosopher Maritain – see, for example, Dilworth (2000) “David Jones and the Maritain Conversation”. An additional important ingredient to his thinking on art theory is constituted by the theoretical discussions generated by the post-impressionist movement in painting, a movement much talked about at the art school Jones attended after returning from the First World War, as he relates himself. Hans-Georg Gadamer, by contrast, was a career philosopher, who is known for creating a grand theory intended to provide a foundation for the social sciences and humanities, a theory which is principally presented in the major work *Wahrheit und Methode*, and his theorising on art takes place as part of that project. Gadamer stands squarely in the German tradition of philosophy, could be said to belong to the phenomenological school, and was strongly influenced by his mentor Heidegger. In order to compare their approaches to explaining how art

means I shall be concentrating on one important essay of each writer. For Jones I shall be referring to his 1955 essay “Art and Sacrament”, and for Gadamer his 1977 essay “Die Aktualität des Schönen” – this essay can be found in English in Gadamer (1986) *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*.

Jones and Gadamer both see representation as the key to how art means, and explore in depth how art represents, Jones through the concept of sacrament and Gadamer through the concept of symbol. It is through representation, in the way they expound it, that art is the vehicle of truth. I shall be particularly concentrating on how they explain this phenomenon and noting the striking overlaps in the resultant theories.

David Jones’ essay “Art and Sacrament”, was written as part of a collection meant to discuss the carrying out of various daily occupations as a Catholic, as Jones (1959:143) explains on the first page, but he initially denies that there is such a thing as a Catholic way of being an artist (Jones 1959:143-144). During the rest of the essay, however, he explains how Catholic thinking has helped him to understand what art is for any artist, explaining that a religion committed to sacrament is one committed to art, sacrament being a kind of artistic sign-making. Jones builds up to what I shall regard as the key passage, where he discusses Hogarth’s painting, *The Shrimp Girl*, by introducing various concepts on which his theory is built. These concepts include the Aristotelian-scholastic distinction between transitive and intransitive activities, which Jones uses to put art on the intransitive side of the distinction, as a gratuitous activity (see e.g. Jones 1959:149). He also identifies art, a gratuitous, sign-making activity, as what distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation, since animals can make, but not gratuitously, and pure spirits, such as angels, cannot make,

not being material (Jones 1959:149-150). He discusses the sacrament of the Eucharist, and argues that the notions of sacrament, sign-making anamnesis are closely similar – thus even non-Catholic understandings of the Eucharist cannot escape its nature as a sign, any more than they could reasonably deny that making a cake for someone’s birthday is a sign-making activity (Jones 1959:164-168; see also, for example, Staudt 1994:36-37 on the centrality of the analogy between sacrament and artistic activity in Jones’ theory). As a further ingredient, he mentions his art-school discussions on post-impressionist theory, from which he drew the idea that “a work is a ‘thing’ and not (necessarily) the impression of some other thing.” (Jones 1959:172) He views the argument between proponents of rival schools of abstract and representational art as missing the point “that all art is abstract and that all art ‘re-presents’.” (Jones 1959:173)

It is as an attempt to explain why he writes “re-presents” rather than “represents” that he undertakes his analysis of how representation happens in a work of art, using as his example Hogarth’s painting *The Shrimp Girl*. He chooses this painting as his example because it is, as he says, “highly realistic” (Jones 1959:173), so he can show how in a representational painting representation works in the same way it would in a more abstract work. He specifies what he sees the painting as: “It is a ‘thing’, an object contrived of various materials and so ordered by Hogarth’s muse as to show forth, recall and re-present, strictly within the conditions of a given art and under another mode, such and such a reality.” (Jones 1959:173) He goes on to explain what the “reality” is: while, it appears to be “a female street-vendor’s mortal flesh and poor habiliments seen under our subtle island-light in the gay squalor that was eighteenth century low-life England”, the reality represented by the painting is not a physical shrimp-girl, as “the

‘flesh and blood’ reality” ... “did but supply the raw material for whatever concept the sight of it set in motion in the mind of the painter.” (Jones 1959:174) So “whatever the material and immaterial elements of that reality may have been, the workings of Hogarth’s art gave to the world a *signum* of that reality, under the species of paint.” (Jones 1959:174-175) It is to be noted here that Jones is using theological language used to explain the Eucharist in the expression “under the species of paint”, substituting “paint” for “bread and wine”. He points out that “It is this objective sign that we can apprehend and enjoy in the National Gallery provided we have the right dispositions” (Jones 1959:175) – this again echoing Catholic understandings of the Eucharist, in which the sacramental reality is objective, although those without the right disposition may be unable to benefit. He restates, again using theological language, while cautioning that he is using it by analogy (a term often used in theology):

So long as there is not a serious disintegration of the ‘matter’ (the paint) we have whatever is denoted under ‘Shrimp Girl’ really present under the form of paint, remembering that ‘Shrimp Girl’ is but a label only for a complex of realities. Not, needless to say, ‘really present’ in the particular sense used by the theologians, but in a certain analogous sense. (Jones 1959:174)

Here the “matter” is analogous to the bread and wine, in the Eucharist, or water or oil in other sacraments, and the term “really present” reminds the reader of the Catholic doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. As Jones clearly expounds, according to his theory, a reality, created in the mind of the artist, is really present in the work the artist created. This embodiment of a reality in a work does not depend on

the reaction of an audience, who may or may not bring what would be needed to appreciate the embodied reality.

Jones concludes the essay by drawing attention to what he sees as being the tendency of the culture phase he is living through to focus on extrinsic activity to the exclusion of the intrinsic dimension. Thus Jones fears that in the future human beings may be alienated from their natural sacramental instincts, and will find the Catholic Church's commitment to sign-making incongruous with their everyday expectations for activities to be subordinated to what Jones calls "the utile", or, as he explains in a note, the "merely utilitarian" or "simply functional" (Jones 1959:176, 176 note 1). He explains that this problem also affects him in his everyday artistic work, as he has to struggle to find signs which will be "available and effectual" (Jones 1959:177), which will communicate in a society less attuned than earlier societies to sign-making activity.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's long essay "Die Aktualität des Schönen", a reworking of what was originally a set of lectures, is also concerned to demonstrate the objectivity of the art work, and to explain how it can present truth. (MacIntyre 1976: 43 points out, in commenting on Gadamer's discussion of art in *Truth and Method*, that Gadamer departs from Neo-Kantians' unspoken assumption that truth and art belong to mutually exclusive realms. For a detailed exposition of Gadamer's aesthetic theory, but in relation to poetry, see Baker 2002.) Gadamer sees a split between the traditional religious-humanistic art of the Western world and an alienated modern art, and wants to explain how they both bear significance in the same way (Gadamer 1977:11-12). Gadamer introduces the problem in the context of the German philosophical tradition, crediting Kant with being the first to recognise the issue of the experiencing of beauty and art as a

philosophical question, but seeing Kant's emphasis on the "meaningless beauty" (*bedeutungslose Schönheit*) being found above all in nature, rather than in art, as needing to be adjusted in favour of seeing the art work as the primary locus of aesthetic significance (Gadamer 1977:23-24). Kant also frames taste, Gadamer (1977:25-6) notes, as communal rather than subjective. As Gadamer expresses this insight,

A purely individual-subjective taste is clearly something senseless in the area of the aesthetic. ("Ein nur individuell-subjektiver Geschmack ist auf dem Gebiet des Ästhetischen offenkundig etwas Sinnloses." Gadamer 1977: 26 – all translations from "Die Aktualität des Schönen" are mine)

Gadamer gives his solution to the problem by presenting his theory of art with the help of three concepts: "play" (*Spiel*), "symbol" (*Symbol*) and "festival" (*Fest*). What I regard as the key passage for the purpose of comparison with Jones, in which he discusses representation, and the Eucharist, occurs in the section on "symbol".

The section on "symbol" follows the section on "play", which is analogous to Jones' discussion of the gratuity of the work of art, and Gadamer begins the "symbol" section by reminding the reader of the origin of the concept "symbol" in the ancient Greek practice of breaking a piece of crockery, and conserving a pair of fitting shards, one in the possession of a host, and one in that of a guest, so that they or their descendants may recognise each other on a subsequent occasion. Thus a symbol, when it is an artwork, is the individual fragment of being which promises that there is something corresponding to it which, with it, will constitute a whole, or that it itself is a missing life-fulfilling fragment:

The symbol, by contrast, the experience of the symbolic, means that this individual, special thing represents itself as a fragment of being, which promises to complete something corresponding to it, to make something whole and healthy, or also, promises that it is the missing piece, always searched for, to make whole our fragment of life. (“Das Symbol, dagegen, das Erfahren des Symbolischen, meint, daß sich dies Einzelne, Besondere wie ein Seinsbruchstück darstellt, das ein ihm Entsprechendes zum Heilen und Ganzen zu ergänzen verheißt, oder auch, daß es das zum Ganzen ergänzende, immer gesuchte andere Bruchstück zu unserem Lebensfragment ist.” Gadamer 1977:42-43)

The experience of the beautiful, especially in the context of art, he argues further, is the “evocation of a possible wholesome order” (“die Beschwörung einer möglichen heilen Ordnung”, Gadamer 1977:43). He takes the opportunity here to argue against Hegel’s understanding of art as “the sensible appearance of the idea” (“dem sinnlichen Scheine der Idee”, Gadamer 1977:43), on the basis that this understanding leads to the expectation that the meaning of the work or art can be translated into concepts, whereas, given Gadamer’s understanding of the art work as symbol, its unique presence is part of its meaning, and cannot be translated into concepts (“The meaning of an artwork, rests rather on the fact, that it is there.” – “Der Sinn eines Kunstwerks beruht vielmehr darauf, daß es da ist.” Gadamer 1977:44). He suggests the word “Gebilde” (“formation”) as an alternative to “Werk” (“work”) for the art work, in order to emphasise that once it has come to be, it is independent of its maker, and is an objective and unique reality – he interprets Benjamin’s notion of the aura of the artwork as another way of stating this insight (Gadamer 1977:44).

Gadamer, in an important paragraph, expands on his idea of the work of art as an embodiment, rather than just carrier of meaning, with the help of ideas he takes from Heidegger, according to whom the human experience of



the world is one of disclosure (“Entbergung”) as well as, at the same time and inseparably, enclosure and veiling (“Verbergung und Verhüllung”) of truth (Gadamer 1977:45). Thus the art work means by simultaneously disclosing and enclosing meaning, resisting any attempt to translate its meaning into a statement, and works rather through its audience “being knocked over” (“ein Umgestoßen-Werden”) by it (Gadamer 1977:45). In the following paragraph Gadamer states that he wishes to deepen Goethe’s and Schiller’s conception of the symbolic, by specifying, “The symbolic does not only point to meaning, but makes it present: it represents meaning.” („Das Symbolische verweist nicht nur auf Bedeutung, sondern läßt sie gegenwärtig sein: es repräsentiert Bedeutung.” Gadamer 1977:46) This statement leads to further exploration of what representation (“Repräsentation”) means. What is represented is not a replacement for anything, but is present in the representation in the way it can be (“Das Repräsentierte ist vielmehr selber da und so, wie es überhaupt da sein kann.” Gadamer 1977:46) He uses as an example the situation where a portrait of a public person is hanging in the main room of a town hall, or somewhere similar – the portrait, Gadamer argues, is not a replacement for the personality depicted, but what is represented is a “piece of its [the public person’s] presence” (“ein Stück ihrer Gegenwart”, Gadamer 1977:46) and it is there in the representation. At this point, Gadamer introduces the Eucharist, and his conviction, as someone who has grown up as a Protestant, that Luther’s understanding of its meaning was correct, and consonant with the traditional Catholic belief, i.e. “that the bread and wine of the sacrament *are* the Christ’s body and blood.” (“... daß Brot und Wein des Sakramentes das Fleisch und Blut Christi *sind*.” Gadamer 1977:46) Gadamer explains that he has introduced this comparison in order to emphasise the point that

in an art work it is not so much that something is indicated, but that what is indicated is in the art work (“daß im Kunstwerk nicht nur auf etwas verwiesen ist, sondern daß in ihm eigentlicher da ist, worauf verwiesen ist.” Gadamer 1977:46) – thus an art work constitutes an “increase in being” (“Zuwachs an Sein”, Gadamer 1977:46). This quality of being an “increase in being” distinguishes the work of art from articles which are merely a “means and tool” (“Mittel und Werkzeug”, Gadamer 1977:47), which cannot be described as a work (“Werk”) but merely as a piece (“Stück”), and are, unlike art works, not irreplaceable (Gadamer 1977:47). Mimesis, he goes on to point out, should be understood as the bringing of something to representation, which could not be grasped in any other way (Gadamer 1977:47-48; Warnke (1987:59) notes that in Gadamer’s philosophy the original is seen in the light of the truth that the representation reveals about it, after the representation has been seen, thus the representation contributes to how the original is understood). He moves on from these issues, in the latter part of the section on “symbol”, to discuss the task of the audience in responding to the art work, whether of a traditional or modern type, finding that any art work creates a community of interpreters if its interpretative community does not already exist (Gadamer 1977:51-52).

The key parallel between the two thinkers is the way they focus on the concept of representation, and find that representation is constituted by the represented reality being present in the art work. They use different language to explain this, Jones using scholastic language to describe, for example, a particular reality conceived by a painter being present in the painting under the form of paint, whereas Gadamer, borrowing from Heidegger, talks of the art work disclosing but also enclosing a truth, and an “increase in being” resulting from the reality that is each art work. Both find

the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist a useful parallel for their concept of the art work. The consequence of their theories of the way that art works can objectively mean, is that interpretation of an art work cannot be a purely subjective activity: there is something objectively present in each art work, a meaning embodied in it, and the beholder of the work of art may or may not bring to it the disposition or background needed to discern something of what is objectively present, and may bring this to a greater or lesser extent, as Jones and Gadamer both stress. (See Nichols (2007:135), who notes that Jones, like Maritain, but unlike Kant, sees intelligibility through the sensuous in art work.) Both Jones and Gadamer distinguish between artistic and non-artistic activity, using, again, different terms, Jones talking of intransitive and transitive activities, and Gadamer using various other terms, including the “work” (“Werk”), for an art work, and a “piece” (“Stück”) for the object of utilitarian character. Both see a change in how art works work in Western society occurring in the nineteenth century, such that there is a break between traditional Western art and twentieth-century Western art – Gadamer emphasises the change from an art which supports a communal understanding, to an art which challenges pre-existing understandings, but needs to create its own smaller communities to understand it, while Jones emphasises a tendency in modern society to reject intransitive activity altogether, and thus be less responsive to the intentions motivating gratuitous acts, such as the making of art works, or performing of rituals. (Blamires (1971:22) notes that this concern about a breakdown in the functioning of symbols in contemporary society is a “constant theme” in Jones’ writings.)

Given this high degree of overlap in the theories, some differences of emphasis can still be pointed out. For example, in their discussions of how

one responds to an art work, for Jones the reality represented is on offer, and the disposition of the audience may or may not enable an appreciation of the reality (this view is analogous to the Catholic understanding of the disposition necessary to benefit from a sacrament), whereas Gadamer emphasises the need for the audience to build up a community of understanding, stimulated by the jolt given by the artwork, but also bringing whatever each individual has in terms of knowledge and experience to the interpretative activity, so that the interpretation achieved involves an element of negotiation, a working up, different every time. On the division between artistic and non-artistic activity Jones sees most types of activity as involving both artistic (intrinsic) and non-artistic (extrinsic) elements, whereas Gadamer seems to draw a clear boundary between art works and non-artistic objects. In their attitudes to the 'break' in the artistic tradition, they differ in emphasis, as mentioned above: Gadamer believes that all kinds of art works work in the same way, creating a community of interpreters if one does not already exist, and does not highlight the idea of an artistic crisis (though he does mention in passing, in the introduction, the difficulties of finding an audience for modern classical music, see Gadamer 1977:8); while Jones, through his analysis, like Gadamer's, is that modern art works work like traditional art works, worries more that in the future the potential audience will lack the disposition to understand, or even seek, sign-making.

### **3. Conclusion**

Nevertheless, the central position they take up on art's truth is substantially the same. Coming from different backgrounds and traditions, on the one hand a mixed Anglo-Saxon and Catholic scholastic background,

on the other hand a formation steeped in the German tradition, a Protestant religious background and an adherence to the phenomenological strain in philosophy, both take the art-for-art-sake tradition as in need of refinement, and specify that, although artistic activity does not directly serve an external practical end, that does not mean that it is meaningless, or that responses to it should be seen as belonging to the realm of pure subjectivity. On the contrary, each art work signifies by uniquely embodying a truth, a reality which is related to other realities found in other forms, but which cannot be exactly translated into a conceptual expression, and which can only be experienced by a direct encounter with the work.

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