

## EDITORIAL

THE greater part of this double issue of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT is composed of the papers and communications read at the conference held in connection with the review at Bishton Hall, near Stafford, in September 1953. It was planned as a contribution towards the welding of the Spiritual Life and the Scriptures whence in many ways that life springs—hence the title of this number. But it will be seen that, as so often happens on these occasions, a particular theme developed and ran right through the conference. It might have been called a conference on the Christian Symbol, its power and effectiveness; and that perhaps would provide a more accurate if more mysterious title here.

In view of this fact no more fitting introduction could be made to the present series of articles than to call the readers' attention to a book which appeared a year ago, but which has not as yet been sufficiently recognized as the most penetrating and all-inclusive treatment of this whole question of symbols in Christian life. We refer to *Anathemata*, by David Jones (Faber and Faber; 25s.). The book is most difficult to read and that is perhaps why it has not yet been given its due; for most of us are unwilling to make the effort to read a difficult book. It is written in an exceptional form of verse depending on internal assonances of meaning as well as of sound; every page teems with elusive mythological figures, with seafaring and liturgical, Welsh and Roman references that demand a constant breaking off to consult the unending footnotes. The reader must go over the passage once, study the notes and then go through it all again and again—and he should read it aloud—to gather all the undertones and overtones into a single harmony. If he will make this effort, which has all the joy of the effort of keen and clean athletics, he will find himself immensely enriched.

For this special use of words comes from the fact that the words themselves are consciously used as symbols or sacraments or effective signs of a whole host of different things.

Just as any single sacrament signifies the Passion in the past, grace in the present, glory in the future, signifies too the outward natural thing, the internal, supernatural thing and the central, mysterious work of redemption—all the same sign with different ways of signification—so the same word causes to live in the mind all sorts of associations arising from myth, the life of Christ, the history of a people, the immediate origins of the culture of the reader. There are different senses of Scripture, because the divinely inspired Word has many meanings, many valid significations; and the divine Word is written not only in the Holy Book, but in the whole expanse of the natural universe, in the valid myths of mankind, in the history of the Church, in the elaboration of the liturgy. All these divine scriptures and their meanings are cropping up in every line of David Jones's book as he struggles with the sign. Referring to his discussions, in the 1920's, of 'the Break' with nature, with religion and the dogma of the sacraments, he writes in his explanatory Preface: 'Our speculations under this head were upon how increasingly isolated such dogma had become, owing to the turn civilization had taken, affecting signs in general and the whole notion and concept of sign'. And he continues:

Water is called the 'matter' of the Sacrament of Baptism. Is 'two of hydrogen and one of oxygen' that 'matter'? I suppose so. But what concerns us here is whether the poet can and does so juxtapose and condition within a context the formula  $H_2O$  as to evoke 'founts', 'that innocent creature', 'the womb of the devine font', 'the candidates', or for that matter 'the narrows' and 'the siluer sea, Which serues it in the office of a wall, Or as a moat defensive to a house'. A knowledge of the chemical components of this material water should, normally, or if you prefer it, ideally, provide us with further, deeper, and more exciting significances *vis-à-vis* the sacrament of water, and also for us islanders, whose history is so much of water with other significances relative to that. In Britain, 'water' is unavoidably very much part of the *materia poetica* . . . (pp. 16-7).

And Mr Jones continues to apply this problem of what we may call the materialization of words, the draining away of

the fullness of the sign from everyday language, to the question of the poet who makes things with signs.

All this about poetry and words may seem to have nothing to do with the reading of the Scriptures. But in fact it has everything to do with it, for in reading the Bible we are stirred by the word-signs made by inspired writers, and if we have been so conditioned by modern civilization as to take those signs with the least possible signification, as we read the formula  $H_2O$ , we shall cease to be stirred by the natural as well as supernatural inherent power of those signs. To turn to Mr Jones's example, we read of our Lord's saying that man must be born again of water and the spirit, but we have tended to seal off the 'feeling' of water which can be a thing of terror in a flood, a thing of refreshment in a drought, which buries the sun at night and gives birth to it again in the morning. . . . The content or 'feeling' for the sign of water was to the Apostles immense—it included not only the meanings in the Old Testament which began with the Spirit brooding over the waters, but all the myths of the pagans around them, Aphrodite and all the rest. To us today it has become simply a material element. 'What is all the fuss about? It is just water, that's all!'

Readers of *Anthemata* may at first be puzzled, if not shocked, at the way the legendary figures of Greek, Roman and Welsh deities appear to be mingled, or even identified, with their Christian counterparts; the Great Mother, earth goddess of fertility, may not seem to be distinguished from the Queen of Heaven whom we celebrate so uniquely this Marian year. To the Celt or Anglo-Saxon listening to the first preachers of Christianity the sign of the virgin conceiving already meant something. It was already a valid sign and the words of Isaias fulfilled at Bethlehem brought all these overtones or undertones with them as they fell on those pagan ears. Now that those other tones have died away we have lost rather than gained in seizing the sense of those scriptural signs. Purification of mind and imagination, the analysis of the true concepts established by revelation were indeed necessary. But we have reached a period when purification or analysis may mean death unless it moves on to the union of synthesis when we can feel again the earth's pulse

in those primitive myths of the gods and realize them at last as fulfilled in the Gospel of the Son of Mary, Mother of God. Such a synthesis may be still remote, since it is not so much analysis and purification of the sacred symbols that has killed those primitive instincts and that primitive feeling for signs in the heavens and in the movement of the earth. The whole civilization in which we live aims at dehydration (taking the water away), cold storage (preserving ourselves and our food from the process of change of season as of life), sterilization (seeing to it that we have the pleasure without fertility). The most important, the most fecund, of word-signs—those of the Bible—have been subjected to this same process of dehydration, cold storage, and sterilization.

But this may perhaps be only a temporary phase. There is some suggestion that the attack on human instinct, the desire for sterility will not last for ever. The writers in this issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* witness to the fact that among Christians at least there is a growing desire for the *sensus plenior*, the recapturing of the multitudinous meaning hidden within the letter of the printed signs in our Bibles or performed in our sacraments. And one or two of them suggest that the water can be brought back to language and to life, the heat reintroduced into frozen human existence, fecundity regenerated in man's pleasures by the true use of the Scriptures and the liturgy themselves. That is a heartening aspiration. And this book, the *Anathemata* of David Jones, is the attempt of a Christian poet 'to lift up valid signs' (the key to the title of the book) in such a way as to speak one language, a unity of image amid the infinite variety of human experience throughout the history of mankind.

Readers of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* are here besought to have patience, not to turn away too easily with the idea that all this about signs and symbols has become an editorial fad. A patient following of the theme will reveal, it is hoped, that all the problems of the spiritual life in the modern world, problems raised by psychology and science, by liturgical revivals and the lay apostolate, by contemplative prayer in an activist world, by the complexities of married life and the strain of living in 'the state of perfection', of authority and freedom, and of all the other practical problems that

beset the Christian who seeks our Lord in the fullness of the spiritual life, these will be found to centre in the understanding and the effective use of Christian symbols; and the origin of these is to be found in the Sacred Scriptures.

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NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATION

The Anglo-Saxon line drawing illustrating Psalm 121 is taken from MS Harley 603 in the British Museum, probably drawn at Christ Church Benedictine Priory, Canterbury, about A.D. 1030. It refers in particular to the article 'Images of the Bible' by Nicolette Gray, who kindly supplied the photograph and who is Editor of the Jacob's Ladder Filmstrips. It shows the faithful hurrying to give praise and to ascend to the city of God, and his hand preserving them.

## ***ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL***

***appeals for help for***

## ***CRIPPLED CHILDREN***

St Vincent's Orthopædic Hospital, Eastcote, Pinner, Middlesex, is *still* a voluntary Hospital under the care of the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul and funds are urgently needed to continue the care of crippled children. *Please send donations to the Matron.*