

# *The Structural Dynamics of David Jones's "The Tribune's Visitation"*

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PUBLISHED IN *The Listener* in 1958, as a separate volume in 1969, and then as one poem of the 1974 collection *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*, "The Tribune's Visitation" is still one of David Jones's least known important poems. Like *In Parenthesis* (1937), "The Tribune's Visitation" presents narrative development as well as a military setting suggesting parallels between ancient and modern times. It is also a poem most impressive — like Jones's greatest poem *The Anathemata* (1955) — in its intricate modernist structure and resonating words and phrases. Although far shorter and less ambitious than either of Jones's two major works, "The Tribune's Visitation" yet provides a concentrated and direct presentation of one of his central themes: the complex and difficult relationship between empires (ancient and modern) and the individual. By examining the structural dynamics of Jones's most accessible important poem, we can best gain an understanding and appreciation of his passionate attack on the cultural "ministers of death."<sup>1</sup>

"The Tribune's Visitation" has a fairly clear surface structure: set in a particular place and time (Jerusalem — the first decades of the first century A.D.), it largely consists of a sustained speech by a Roman Tribune to soldiers of his command. This structure has three movements: the Tribune arrives and the sergeant assembles the troops; the Tribune addresses the troops, speaking of military discipline and dedication; and the Tribune continues his address but leads into his central argument concerning the need for total loyalty and submission to the Roman State and the reigning Caesar.

Besides creating a clear narrative movement rare in Jones's modernist poetry, the structure outlined above allows him to develop and dramatize a powerful and interesting central sensibility — the Tribune himself. The Tribune has something of the dark appeal which Milton's Satan has for modern readers of *Paradise Lost*: that of a charismatic, if ultimately corrupt, leader who is a subtle and powerful rhetorician and whose presence, though sinister, commands respect and attention. In his many voices, the Tribune also has much in common with Shakespeare's Mark Antony, especially as he speaks to the mob after Caesar's murder, and to O'Brien of the inner party in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Like those characters, the Tribune is an intelligent, cunning, and highly resourceful figure possessing a strong will and dedicated to the preservation of the empire he serves. All the Tribune's attention and powers are focused on the single objective of convincing his troops that they "are dead to nature / yet live / to Caesar" (p. 58).

The narrative structure, although it allows Jones to make powerful use of a central sensibility, does not account for the presence of certain important formal elements which suggest a structural life in the poem distinct from, and more important than, the narrative movement. One such element is the rapid succession of different, and sometimes contradictory, tonal centres. In turns, the Tribune is sarcastic, nagging, distant, authoritarian, vulnerable, brotherly and, finally, even mystical. The positioning of these moods and tones suggests an interweaving pattern — and thus a structural function which reveals much about the Tribune's character and beliefs. Another formal element which must be considered is Jones's use of both poetry and prose formations. How these formations might relate to one another and what kinds of patterns might be discerned in their juxtaposition are crucial questions. In answering these and similar questions, I will be dealing with the underlying structural dynamics which are mostly responsible for the emotional and intellectual impact the poem creates.

The first part of the narrative spans the time between the Tribune's arrival and his address to the troops. This section provides the beginning of a series of radical changes in tone, and

it presents what will be the poem's dominant thematic concerns. The sergeant speaks the opening eight lines of "The Tribune's Visitation," beginning with the word "Sir!" which reflects his initial surprise tinged with tension and anxiety at the unexpected appearance of a Tribune. Because these lines consist entirely of stated answers (we have to infer the questions), they suggest a dialogue, though no true dialogue exists. This technique compresses the language, forcing a double function on each line: a line communicates both its literal content and the question to which it is responding. Thus the first eight lines move in a highly charged, crisp, respectful, somewhat nervous manner, enhanced by the presence of numerous "Sirs":

Sir!  
 No sir, yes sir, Middle Watch Relief, sir.  
 Just come off, sir.  
 Yes sir.  
 Well, no sir, half an hour back, sir. (p. 45)

There is something initially sinister about the fact that we do not see or hear the shadowy questioner — we are only aware of the powerful effect he is having on the sergeant. Because our attention is focused entirely on the sergeant's answers, we become highly attuned to the pressure the sergeant must feel having the Tribune single him out for a verbal grilling. So in addition to creating a sense of rapidity, the opening lines also create feelings of nervousness, tension, and pressure — all of which resurface later in the poem.

At line nine we suddenly hear the Tribune ask a question, though there is no typographical change to indicate this introduction of a new voice. The reader surmises it is the Tribune's voice that has entered because of the nature of the question and simply because line nine *is* a question. The Tribune moves from asking the sergeant about the ethnic makeup of the garrison ("In particular?" [l. 9]) to asking about his cultural background ("I see, and you, sergeant?" [l. 10]). This time it is the sergeant's answer which is implied rather than stated. In both lines the Tribune's voice is calm, self-assured, and very much in control of the "dialogue." Jones, of course, could have brought the Tribune's voice in at any stage, but chose to bring it in at the point

when the sergeant refers to the mixed cultural backgrounds of the troops. By introducing the Tribune's voice at that particular moment and in such a sudden manner, Jones emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of the garrison. Through this technique one important thematic element — the process by which men of vastly different cultural traditions from all parts of the world were absorbed into the Roman Empire — is briefly highlighted.

The great importance of this initial questioning and of the information it yields the Tribune and the reader is not clear until a few lines later, when the first radical shift of tone occurs. In answer to an implied question concerning the length of his service, the sergeant responds, "Fifteen years, sir, come next October Games" — a response comparable to saying one has served fifteen years come Christmas. This seemingly innocuous, momentary departure from the utterly professional nature of the sergeant's earlier responses touches off a tirade of sarcasm and indignation from the Tribune, who only seems to regain his initial calm when he takes note of the sergeant's various battle medals — and the service and bravery those medals honour:

October Games!	and whose games, pray, are these?
Some Judy-show	to make the flowers grow?
the April mocked man	crowned and cloaked
I suppose	going rustic are they under y'r very nose
and you good Cockney bred born well in sound of the geese-cry and with the Corona up, I see	and of the First Grade. (pp. 45-46)

As suddenly as he has launched into the tirade, the Tribune breaks out of it, resuming his neutral questioning. However, after pressing for specific details concerning the medals, the Tribune abruptly cuts him off, again by giving the sergeant a clearly undeserved tongue-lashing which includes a brief dig at the his "plebeian" background:

Enough! I'm not asking for back-filed awards or press *communiqués* — no doubt the *Acta* gave you half a column on how plebeian blood's no bar to bravery — I know it all backwards.  
(p. 46)

The introductory movement then concludes with an ominous complex of tones: a vaguely threatening aside to the sergeant ("We'll speak presently, you and I"), a derisive comment on the garrison's varied ethnic make-up ("For now, where's this mixed bunch of yours?") and a final statement of dark intent ("I have a word to say").

In this brief section Jones has shifted through several distinct tones. Initially, these rapid changes of mood and tone may seem to function only in helping portray the Tribune as a volatile sensibility, a kind of bad-tempered drill-sergeant whose anger is triggered by the slightest real or imagined provocation. One important question concerns whether these shifts of mood and tone are beyond the Tribune's control or part of a larger, deliberate scheme. Since the Tribune could not have anticipated the sergeant's use of the phrase "October Games," his sudden, harsh response would seem impulsive. However, as we shall see, there is evidence that the tonal shifts in his speech are deliberate, that the sequence of tones has a direction and purpose. This calculated aspect of the structure is reinforced by the Tribune's repeated variations of the phrase "I have a word to say" — a declaration of specific intent and purpose. Like most skilled rhetoricians, the Tribune has an overall rhetorical strategy but leaves room for ad-libbing, for thinking and responding "on his feet." Thus the Samnite and Etruscan privates are abused by the Tribune (p. 47) because they are convenient, immediate targets useful in his overall design. The calculated layer of the poem's structure helps make the reader somewhat uneasy — a point we shall return to later.

In trying to determine a cause for this shift into the sarcastic tone just discussed, we must examine the sergeant's phrase "October Games," which immediately precedes the Tribune's outburst. It is the fact that the sergeant measures time by the date of the October Games, a Roman festival originating in a much earlier festival or ritual, that touches off the Tribune's reaction.

At that moment we are made aware of the greatest source of conflict in the poem: the power of homogeneous empire (as represented and embodied by the Tribune) battling the very different kind of power inherent in the diverse cultures and traditions of the world (represented by the varied backgrounds of the troops being addressed).<sup>2</sup> The depth of the Tribune's reaction to "October Games" is further emphasized when he returns to asking neutral questions about the sergeant's medals, only to have his anger resurface under the guise of impatience with the sergeant's supposed long-windedness: "Enough! I'm not asking for back-filed awards. . . ." Even in his neutral questioning, however, the Tribune sneers briefly when he asks "Where won? or was it an issue, sergeant?" — implying that perhaps the army issued the Corona along with sword, armour, and sandals.

The sarcastic tone, so dominant in the opening movement of "The Tribune's Visitation," is sustained through pp. 47-51, where the Tribune ridicules soldiers because they look distinctive in some way:

And you with the Etruscan look  
not Pte Maecenas by any chance?  
No sir, 330099 Elbius, sir. (p. 47)

His reference is to Maecenas, a chief minister under Augustus who was known as a literary patron but also for his effeminate dress and his uxoriousness. The Tribune abuses Elbius for being — like Maecenas — effeminate ("y'r bared flanks become you well") and overweight ("with a taste for the boards"). He also states that Elbius enjoys the periodic "reg'mental binge."

When he next bullies the troops as a group (pp. 47-51), the Tribune uses such conventional military chastisements as "But a word more; this chitty's fire is built for section's rations, not for warming backsides" (pp. 48-51).<sup>3</sup> After p. 50, however, these verbal assaults diminish in frequency and intensity and reappear only in brief passages, finally disappearing entirely after p. 55. There is thus a pattern to the shifting of the sarcastic tone: it is introduced at the beginning, is intensified and sustained for a few pages, then diminishes before being dropped entirely, well before the poem's conclusion.

As the intensity of the passages comprising a particular tonal movement diminishes, another tone begins a rising counter-movement. Neither the diminishing nor the rising is accomplished in a steady, constant way; instead, all tones appear, vanish, and reappear rather abruptly, in an interweaving pattern. These larger structural movements can best be illustrated by an examination of one section of the poem, looking both at the tonal shifts and the relationships between different ones. On pp. 48-49 there are three consecutive passages which nicely demonstrate some of the dynamics at work. They consist of the prose passage beginning "But enough: analogies are wearisome," the poetry formation following and the prose formation after that, ending with the phrase "mount the guard in muffs."

The prose passage has a folksy, even playful quality — it shows the Tribune enjoying the sounds of words and even indulging in a little buffoonery with language: "But I'll be 'forthright Roman' as the saying goes, but seldom goes beyond the saying." The Tribune's new mood is surprising because of its sudden appearance and its implications: his word-play, for instance, forces one to reject the stereotyped concept of the "forthright Roman" — an ideal we would not expect this Tribune to joke about. The folksy tone of the passage is partly created by Jones's use of a prose formation, which tends to flatten, or mask, rhythms by running together lines which would, as poetry, be broken into units that enhance (or create) rhythms. In this passage, the Tribune's speech appears to be natural and prosaic, though a close examination reveals many aspects of patterned language normally associated with poetry: balanced clauses ("But I'll be 'forthright Roman' as the saying goes, but seldom goes beyond the saying"), assonance and alliteration (as in "Transpadane grandma" and "out-poet ovates from farside the Gaulish Strait" — referring to the poetic skills of Welsh druids and bards during pre Roman-conquest times). In just four sentences, this prose formation reveals startling new dimensions of the Tribune — insights into his personal side. We see that he has ancestral associations with a particular locality: one branch of his family comes from the area north of the Po River in Italy ("Transpadane"). He also confesses to being proud of his ability to use

language effectively and points out that his oratorical skills have been passed down from his "grandma's friend." So even the Tribune seems to recognize the importance of values, skills, and traditions handed on through generations.

This isolated mood — intimate, folksy, somewhat self-revelatory — is the first, brief element of the rising curve of self-revelation and vulnerability, a confession which expands and intensifies in pages following the prose formation just examined. That larger, sustained movement first picks up the earlier, low-level confessional tone with the lines:

I would speak as Caesar's friend to Caesar's friends. I would say  
my heart, for I am in a like condemnation.

I too could weep  
and for the remembered things. for these Saturnian spells  
(p. 52)

These lines present a more intensified version of the "folksy" mood already examined. It reaches its highest pitch in the Tribune's exhortation:

Listen! be silent!  
you *shall* understand  
the horror of this thing.  
Dear brothers, sweet men, Italian loves  
it may not be. (p. 54)

Looking back to p. 48, we see that the poetry following the prose lines just examined introduces an entirely new mood, also having several layers of complexity. First, because of its position, it seems to be a reaction against what has just been said, as if the Tribune, realizing the implication of his sudden, joking informality, becomes serious and highly formal in his speech to reassert his authority. This passage presents a stately, highly rhythmical movement — one of pride and patriotism, with a strong, quasi-religious or mythical undercurrent:

The loricas of Caesar's men  
should shine like Caesar  
back and front



whose thorax shines all ways  
   and to all quarters  
   to the world-ends  
 whether he face unstable Britain  
   or the weighty Persians.

So that all of them say:  
   Rome's back is never turned. (p. 48)

In this passage Jones uses typographical spacing to indent shorter lines well to the right of longer, more substantial lines. One tends to place greater emphasis on the lines at the left margin, which have three or four stresses each, while giving less emphasis to indented lines having only two stresses each. This pattern holds except for the last two line set, where the order is reversed so that greatest emphasis falls on the sinister line, "Rome's back is never turned." Because of the consistency of this pattern, the balanced, stately lines of poetry also create the effect of ritualized incantation supported by the quasi-religious or mystical content describing the reigning Caesar as an ubiquitous, god-like force whose presence emanates in all directions.

Like the vulnerable tone of the prose passage before it, the brief, patriotic/mystical mood (in which patriotism is directly linked with mysticism) proves to be the first element in a rising movement which intensifies and redirects the original tone. Before the mysticism gathers momentum as it approaches the conclusion, there are occasional tonal notes that begin to modulate toward the larger movement: one example is the Tribune's comment that Roman soldiers must

  . . . discipline the world-floor  
 to a common level  
   till everything presuming difference  
 and all the sweet remembered demarcations  
   wither  
 to the touch of us  
   and know the fact of empire. (pp. 50-51)

In using the phrase "wither / to the touch of us," the Tribune speaks figuratively of the very real power wielded by his empire; but his language (especially his use of "wither" — given emphasis by its isolation), suggests that a supernatural, evil, and deadly force is behind "the fact of empire." The mood, which in its



assume to be the Tribune's purpose. There is an elegiac note to the Tribune's voice at the conclusion: it is a deeply saddened, compassionate voice which yet addresses the goddess Lucina with some fervour, asking for light while knowing the goddess cannot provide the light he needs. The coming of dawn is the occasion for this address to Lucina, but for the Tribune, who has embraced the death-cult of empire, there can be no figurative dawn. In the lines "From darkness / to a greater dark / the issue is" we see a hint of foreknowledge, of certitude concerning what the future will bring men like the Tribune — and what it will bring the Roman Empire itself. There is also a strong sense of fatality created by the presence of two questions asking for light which are answered negatively, in the third sentence, by the confirmation of darkness. But when we turn to the language leading up to this passage, we become aware of characteristics which are not so fatalistic and dark.

Throughout the poem, Jones subtly reminds the reader of the life and Passion of Christ, and these echoes are most clear and numerous in the two pages preceding the final lines. The Tribune's image of soldiers issuing "from Caesar's womb" brings to mind Christ's miraculous conception and birth. It also echoes the many New Testament references to the necessity of being "born again" (such as, "Jesus answered and said unto him . . . Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," John 3:3). The Tribune's communion ritual ("See! I break this barrack bread, I drink with you, this issue cup. . . ." p. 58) is an obvious parallel to the Last Supper. Also, the language of the final movement draws heavily on the Biblical language and rhythms of the King James Version of the New Testament. When the Tribune says, "Let the gnosis of necessity infuse our hearts, for we have purged out the leaven of illusion," one recognizes "gnosis" and "hearts" as having extensive Biblical roots, but in particular the sentence recalls the passage in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump. . . ." Similarly, the light/darkness dichotomy employed in the final movement is standard Biblical symbolism, recalling such verses as "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness" (Matthew 6:32), as well as the charac-

terization of Christ as “the light of the world.” Because the figure and life of Christ are so present in the final movement of “The Tribune’s Visitation” one can argue that the language points the reader to a specifically Christian perspective. The Biblical references indirectly remind us that not too long after the time of the poem there will be an event — the Crucifixion — whose aftermath will help destroy the Roman Empire and establish a religion which (in Jones’s view) contradicts the darkness and emptiness of the Tribune’s world vision.

A close reading of “The Tribune’s Visitation” makes us aware of what is attractive and repulsive in the concept of “empire.” We become aware both of the great power which an empire can wield through a figure like the Tribune and of the powerless, precarious condition of the diverse cultures of the world. Perhaps the most important awareness of all concerns those basic human needs which, in the poem’s terms, can only be fulfilled by an identification, at the deepest level, with either the “remembered things” of individual backgrounds or with the “world-hegemony” embodied by the reigning Caesar. To the extent that the poem forces this choice on the reader, “The Tribune’s Visitation” is a political poem. Though Jones uses the context of the Roman Empire, a modern parallel is clear throughout: we have our own empires which are relentlessly absorbing — culturally, militarily, economically — the smaller cultures of the world.

To some extent the structure of “The Tribune’s Visitation” charts the Tribune’s “battle-plan,” his rhetorical plan of attack. Thus the volatile tonal shifts do not purely reflect the free, responsive movement of the Tribune’s mind. Because many of the shifts reveal a calculated quality not fully apparent until the structure is examined as a whole, the poem creates the uneasy sense that a master rhetorician is at work. But while we see the Tribune manipulating his emotions, we also sense that his expressions of emotion often yield an aura of truth, or at least of authentic confession. When the Tribune says, “I too could weep / for these Saturnian spells / and for the remembered things,” the lines resonate with honesty; they communicate deep attachment to the ancient rituals of his locality and culture. This effect is achieved partly because the Tribune’s language — often man-

nered and distant ("I have a word to say for which a measure of composure may, in you, be requisite" (p. 49) — becomes more direct, employing simpler syntax and diction.

Although the poem's tonal structure dramatizes the Tribune's manipulative abilities, it also reveals a man of great complexity, a multi-dimensional figure who defies stereotyping and who is capable of wide-ranging emotions and attitudes. "The Tribune's Visitation" might be described as "didactic" in the sense that Jones is clearly arguing for the preservation of the world's small, threatened cultures, but the poem does not strive for a simple, one-dimensional statement: we are sometimes seduced by the Tribune's argument, sometimes repulsed, sometimes ambivalent. And the Tribune himself, the symbol of humanity losing touch with "the remembered things," can be a highly attractive figure of power, intelligence, and compassion as well as the terrifying embodiment of evil.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David Jones, "The Tribune's Visitation" in *The Sleeping Lord* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 56. All subsequent references to this poem will be in parenthesis following the quotation.
- <sup>2</sup> Thus, it is where the sarcastic tone begins that a thematic element is introduced. In general, at places in the poem where a tone is suddenly introduced or intensified, important thematic elements become highly visible.
- <sup>3</sup> "Chitty's fire" refers to the cook's fire in an army unit.
- <sup>4</sup> Grateful acknowledgement is due the National Endowment for the Humanities in the preparation of this paper.